

THE BEST OF ORSON SCIENCE FICTION NO.6

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

FIRST PUBLICATION
OF HARLAN ELLISON'S
"CHAINED TO THE
FAST LANE IN THE RED
QUEEN'S RACE"

**PLUS 16 MORE
ILLUSTRATED STORIES—
NEW AND CLASSIC.**

FEATURING
ORSON SCOTT CARD
SALVADOR DALI
POUL ANDERSON
RENE MAGRITTE

EDITED BY DON MYRUS



THE BEST OF **OMNI** SCIENCE FICTION NO.6

With six volumes now published in this very successful series, we are committed to the above title, even though it consists not only of reprints but of never-before-published stories as well. This has been straightforwardly stated on the covers of volumes two through five. Nevertheless, we still occasionally come upon a surprised, albeit pleased, reader who exclaims, "Original stories? Really?" Yes. Absolutely. Here, along with ten reprints from *Omni* and two classic stories, are five originals, all so good that they, too, can be categorized among the best—although some science-fiction punts will no doubt argue that one or two of these originals strain the boundaries of the genre. Perhaps.

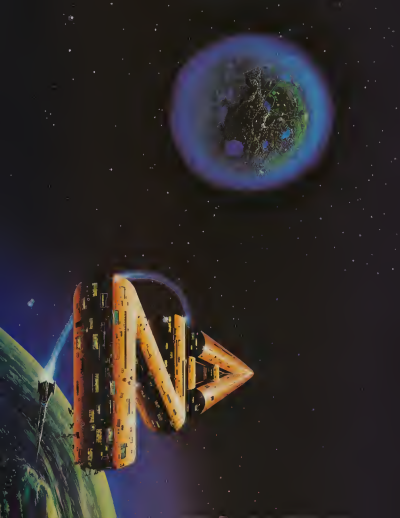
But science fiction has long been in a state of flux; stirring it up some more can only be for the good.

And another thing, just what is science fiction? Harlan Ellison, for example, vehemently contends that he's not a science-fiction writer, yet he enthusiastically contributed one of the original stories in this book. And two of the reprints are his.

All this seems just and proper. A title that is indefinite, some stories that may be considered as more fantasy than science fiction, an author of science fiction who says he isn't. Ambiguity is a common condition in the world of imaginative literature. Happily, it is so—for our reading pleasure.

EDITED BY DON MYRUS

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BOB GUCCIONE, EDITOR, PUBLISHER & DESIGN DIRECTOR
KATHY KEETON, PRESIDENT



THE BEST OF **OMNI** SCIENCE FICTION NO.6

SPECIAL EDITORIAL SERVICES FOR THIS BOOK WERE PROVIDED BY AARON NORMAN AND DEBORAH WRAY. SPECIAL DESIGN BY RICHARD BLEWISS.

BETSY WYDA, ASSISTANT EDITOR

LINDA QUINN, ADMINISTRATION

COVER PAINTING BY
MICHAEL PARKES

FACING PAGE
PAINTING BY
TIM WHITE

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OMNI ENCORE PART ONE

F

From the first issue of *Omni* (October 1978) to this writing (July 1981), one hundred sixty-one science-fiction stories have been published in its pages. Choosing the best for republication has been a challenging task. All the stories are read not only by the editor, but by his associates who, for each story, write a report made up of a précis and a value judgment. Then the editor cogitates and decides.

It is worthy to recall now a very literate young woman's evaluation of "A Sepulcher of Songs" by Orson Scott Card. The report on this bitter-sweet tale, of a girl with no limbs and the man who tries to keep her from running away, concludes: "A good and touching idea, presented with grace and subtlety. The author leaves it up to the reader whether Elaine's story is madness or truth."

The report on William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" notes that "man, woman, beast, and machine have fused into awesome warriors—some of whom are appealing, some of whom aren't. It's a grim tale, but it has its comical side, too. Villains lurk around every corner. Peter Lorre and Sidney Greenstreet would be at home here."

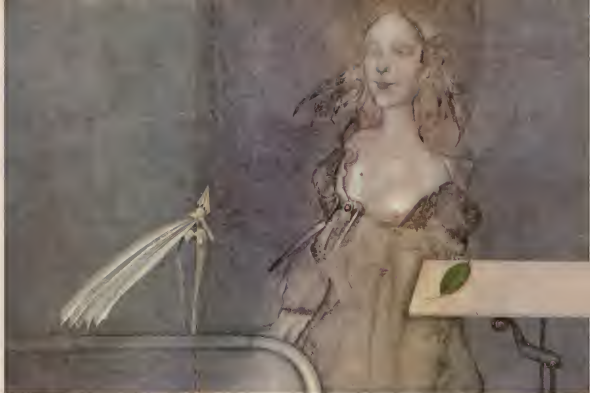
Born in Berlin in 1927, Paul Wunderlich has been much celebrated since the early 1960s. His paintings selected here were published in *Omni* in October 1981. Their personalized, very colorful subject matter fits in well with the magazine's celebrated graphics.

A SEPULCHER OF SONGS

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

A young girl's freedom depends on the love of a man and a promise from the stars

PAINTING BY ARMODIO



She was losing her mind during the rain. For four weeks it came down nearly every day, and the people at the Miland County Rest Home didn't take any of the patients outside. It bothered them all, of course, and made me especially hellish for the nurses, everyone complaining to them constantly and demanding to be entertained.

Elaine didn't demand entertainment, however. She never seemed to demand much of anything. But the rain hurt her worse

than anyone. Perhaps because she was only fifteen, the only child in an institution devoted to adult misery. More likely because she depended more than most on the hours spent outside, certainly she took more pleasure from them. They would lift her into her chair propped up with pillows so her body would stay straight, and then race down the corridor to the glass doors, Elaine calling "Faster faster" as they pushed her out! Finally they were outside. They told me she never really said anything out there. Just sat

quietly in her chair on the lawn, watching everything. And then later in the day they would wheel her back in. I often saw her being wheeled in—early because I was there, though she never complained about my voice, cutting into her hours outside. As I watched her being pushed toward the rest home, she would smile at me so exuberantly that my mind invented arms for her waving madly to match her childishly delighted face. I imagined legs pumping, imagined her running across the grass

breasting the air like great waves. But there were the pillows where arms should be keeping her from falling to the side, and the belt around her middle kept her from pitching forward, since she had no legs to balance with.

It rained four weeks, and I nearly lost her. My job was one of the worst in the state: touring six rest homes in as many counties, visiting each of them every week. I did therapy—wherever the rest home administrators thought therapy was needed. I never figured out how they decided—all the patients were mad to one degree or another, most with the helplessness of age, the rest with the anguish of the invalid and the crippled.

You don't end up as a state-employed therapist if you had much ability in college. I sometimes pretend that I didn't distinguish myself in graduate school because I marched to a different drummer. But I didn't. As one kind professor gently and brutally told me, I wasn't cut out for science. But I was sure I was cut out for the art of therapy. Ever since I comforted my mother during her final year of cancer, I had believed I had a knack for helping people get straight in their minds. I was everybody's confidant.

Somehow I had never supposed though that I would end up trying to help the hopeless in a part of the state where even the healthy didn't have much to live for. Yet that's all I had the credentials for, and when I (so maturely) told myself I was over the initial disappointment, I made the best of it.

Elaine was the best of it. Raining, raining, raining—was the greeting I got when I visited her on the third day of the wet spell.

"Don't I know it?" I said. "My hair's soaking wet."

Was mine was? Elaine answered. "No, you don't. You'd get sick."

Not me, she said. Well, Mr. Woodbury told me you're depressed. I'm supposed to make you happy.

Make it stop raining. Do look like God?

"I thought maybe you were in disguise. I'm in disguise," she said. "It was one of our regular games. I'm really a large Texas armadillo who was granted one wish. I wished to be a human being. But there wasn't enough of the armadillo to make a full human being, so here I am." She smiled. I smiled back.

Actually, she had been five years old when an oil truck exploded right in front of her parents' car, killing both of them and blowing her arms and legs right off. That she survived was a miracle. That she had to keep on living was unimaginable cruelty. That she managed to be a reasonably happy person, a favorite of the nurses—that I don't understand in the least. Maybe it was because she had nothing else to do. There aren't many ways that a person with no arms or legs can kill herself.

"I want to go outside," she said, turning her head away from me to look out the window.

Outside wasn't much. A few trees, a lawn, and beyond that a fence, not to keep the inmates in but to keep out the summer residents of a rather seamy town. But there were low hills in the distance, and the birds usually seemed cheerful. Now, of course the rain had driven both birds and hills into hiding. There was no wind, and so the trees didn't even sway. The rain just came straight down.

"Outer space is like the rain," she said. "It sounds like that out there, just a low drizzling sound in the background of everything."

"Not really," I said. "There's no sound out there at all."

"How do you know?" she asked. "There's no air. Can't be any sound without air."

She looked at me scornfully. Just as I thought, You don't really know. You've never been there, have you?

"Are you trying to pick a fight?" She started to answer, caught herself, and nodded. "Damned rain."

"At least you don't have to drive in it," I said. But her eyes got watery, and I knew I had taken the banter too far. "Hey," I said. "First clear day I'll take you out driving."

What hormones, she said. "What's hormones?"

"I'm fifteen. It always bothered me when I had to stay in. But I want to scream. My muscles are all bunched up, my stomach is all tight. I want to go outside and scream it's hormones."

What about your hands? I asked. Are you kidding? They're all out there playing in the rain.

All of them? "Except Gruntly, of course. He'd dissolve."

"And where's Gruntly?" "In the freezer, of course. Sometimes the nurses are going to mis-

take him for ice cream and serve him to the guests."

She didn't smile. She just nodded, and I knew that I wasn't getting anywhere. She really was depressed.

I asked her whether she wanted something.

"No pills," she said. "They make me sleep all the time."

If I gave you spitters, it would make you climb the walls."

"Next rock," she said.

"It's that strong. So do you want something to take your mind off the rain and these four ugly yellow walls?"

She shook her head. "I'm trying not to sleep."

Why not?"

She just shook her head again. "Can't sleep. Can't let myself sleep too much."

I asked again.

"Because," she said. "I might not wake up." She said it rather sternly, and I knew I shouldn't ask anymore. She didn't often get impatient with me, but I knew this time I was coming perilously close to oversteering my welcome.

"Got to go," I said. "You will wake up. And then I left, and I didn't see her for a week, and to tell the truth I don't think of her much that week, what with the rain and a suicide in Ford County that really got to me, since she was fairly young and had a lot to live for in my opinion. She disagreed and won the argument the hard way."

Weekends I live in a trailer in Padmore. I live alone. The place is spotlessly clean because cleaning is something I do religiously. Blasphemy, I tell myself. I might want to bring a woman home with me one night. Some nights I even do, and some nights I even enjoy it, but I always get restless and irritable when they start trying to get me to change my work schedule or take them along to the motel. I have or once only got the trailer-park manager to let them into my trailer when I'm gone. To keep things cozy for me. I'm not interested in "cozy." This is probably because of my mother's death, her cancer and my responsibilities as housekeeper for my father probably explain why I am a neat-housekeeper. Therapist, therapist, therapist. The days passed in rain and highways and depressing people depressed out of their minds, the nights passed in television and sandwiches and motel bedsheets at state expense, and then it was time to go to the Millard County Rest Home again, where Elaine was waiting. It was then that I thought of her and re-

alized that the rain had been going on for more than a week, and the poor girl must be almost out of her mind. I bought a cassette of Copland conducting Copland. She insisted on cassettes because they stopped. Eight tracks went on and on until she couldn't think.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Locked in a cage by a cruel duke in Transylvania. It was only four feet high, suspended over a pond filled with crocodiles. I got out by picking the lock with my teeth. Luckily, the crocodiles weren't hungry. Where have you been?"

"I mean it. Don't you keep a schedule?"
"I'm right on my schedule. Elaine. This is Wednesday. I was here last Wednesday. This year Christmas falls on a Wednesday and I'll be here on Christmas."

"It feels like a year.
"Only ten months. 'Til Christmas. Elaine, you aren't being any fun."

"She wasn't in the mood for fun. There were tears in her eyes. "I can't stand much more," she said.

"I'm sorry
I'm afraid

And she was afraid. Her voice trembled.
"At night, and in the daytime, whenever I sleep, I'm just the right size.

"For what?"
"What do you mean?"

"You said you were just the right size."
"I did? Oh, I don't know what I meant. I'm going crazy. That's what you're here for, isn't it? To keep me sane. It's the rain. I can't do anything. I can't see anything, and all I can hear most of the time is the hearing of the rain."

"Like outer space?" I said, remembering what she had said the last time.

"She apparently didn't remember our discussion. She looked startled. How did you know?" she asked.

"You told me.
"There isn't any sound in outer space," she said.

"Oh, I answered.
There's no air out there.
I knew that.

"Then why didn't you say, 'Oh, of course?' The engines. You can hear them all over the ship. It's a drone, all the time. That's just like the rain. Only after a while you can't hear it anymore. It becomes like silence. Anansa told me.

Another imaginary friend. Her life said that she had kept her imaginary friends long after most children over them up. That

was why I had first been assigned to see her to get rid of the friends. Grunt, the ice pig. Howard, the boy who beat up everybody. Sue Ann, who would bring her dolls and play with them for her, making them do what Elaine said for them to do. Fuchsia, who lived among the flowers and was only inches high. There were others. After a few sessions with her, I saw that she knew that they weren't real. But they passed time for her. They stayed outside her body and did things she could never do. I felt they did her no harm at all, and destroying that imaginary world for her would only make her lonelier and more unhappy. She was sane, that was certain. And yet I kept seeing her not entirely because I liked her so much. Partly because I wondered whether she had been pretending when she told me she knew her friends weren't real. Anansa was a new one.

"Who's Anansa?"
"Oh, you don't want to know. She didn't want to talk about her, that was obvious."

"I want to know.
She turned away. "I can't make you go away, but I wish you would. When you get away."

"It's my job."
"Job?" She sounded contemptuous. "I see all of you, running around on your healthy legs, doing all your jobs."

"What could I say to her?" "It's how we stay alive," I said. "I do my best."

Then she got a strange look on her face. I've got a secret, she seemed to say, and I want you to pry it out of me. "Maybe I can get a job, too."

"Maybe," I said. I tried to think of something she could do.

"There's always music," she said.
"I understand. There aren't many instruments you can play. That's the way it is. Dose of reality and all that."

"Don't be stupid.
Okay. Never again.

I meant that there's always the music. On my job."

"And what job is that?"
"Wouldn't you like to know?" she said, rolling her eyes mysteriously and turning toward the window. I imagined her as a normal fifteen-year-old girl. Ordinarily I would have interpreted this as flirting. But there was something else under all this. A feeling of desperation. She was right. I really would like to know. I made a rather logical guess. I put together the two secrets she was trying to get me to figure out for her.

"What kind of job will Anansa give you?"

She looked at me, started. "So it's true then?"

"What's true?"
"It's so frightening. I keep telling myself it's a dream. But it isn't, is it?"

"What Anansa?"
"You think she's just one of my friends, don't you. But they're not in my dreams, not like this. Anansa—"

"What about Anansa?"
"She sings to me. In my sleep.

My trained psychologist's mind immediately conjured up mother figures. "Of course," I said.

"She's in space and she sings to me. You wouldn't believe the songs."

It reminded me. I pulled out the cassette I had bought for her.

"Thank you," she said.
"You're welcome. Want to hear it?"

She nodded. I put it on the cassette player. Appalachian Spring. She moved her head to the music. I imagined her as a dancer. She felt the music very well.

But after a few minutes she stopped moving and started to cry.

"It's not the same," she said.
"You've heard it before?"

"Turn it off. Turn it off!"
I turned it off. "Sorry," I said. "Thought you'd like it."

"Guilt, nothing but guilt," she said. "You always feel guilty, don't you?"

Pretty nearly always. I admitted cheerfully. A lot of my patients throw psychological jargon in my face. Or soap-opera language.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just—it's just not the music. Not the music. Now that I've heard it, everything is so dark compared to it. Like the rain is always in the way. For a few minutes I thought he was getting it right."

"Anansa's music?"
She nodded. "I know you don't believe me. But I hear her when I'm asleep. She tells me that's the only time she can communicate with me. It's not talking. It's all her songs. She's out there, in her starship, singing. And at night I hear her."

"Why you?"
"You mean why only me?" She laughed.

Because of what I am. You told me yourself. Because I can't run around. I live in my imagination. She says that the threads between minds are very thin and hard to hold. But mine she can hold, because I live completely in my mind. She holds on to me. When I go to sleep, I can't escape her now anymore at all."

Escape? I thought you liked her.
I don't know what I like. I like—I like the music. But Anarsia wants me. She wants to have me—she wants to give me a job.

What's the singing like? "When she said job, she trembled and closed up. I related back to something that she had been willing to talk about—to keep the foundering conversation going.

It's not like anything. She's there in space, and it's black, just the humming of the engines like the sound of rain, and she reaches into the dust out there and draws in the songs. She reaches out her—out her fingers, or her ears. I don't know, it isn't clear. She reaches out and draws in the dust and the songs and turns them into the music that I hear. It's powerful. She says it's her songs that drive her between the stars." "Is she alone?"

Elaine nodded. She wants me. Wants you. How can she have you, with you here and her out there?

Elaine licked her lips. "I don't want to talk about it," she said in a way that told me she was on the verge of telling me.

"I wish you would. I really wish you'd tell me."

"She says—she says that she can take me. She says that if I can learn the songs she can pull me out of my body and take me there and give me arms and legs and fingers and I can run and dance and—"

She broke down, crying.

I patted her on the only place that she permitted herself to be touched. She refused to be hugged. I had tried it years before and she had screamed at me to stop it. One of the nurses told me it was because her mother had always hugged her and Elaine wanted to hug back. And couldn't.

"It's a lovely dream, Elaine."
"It's a terrible dream. Don't you see? I'll be like her."

And what's she like?

"She's the ship. She's the starship. And she wants me with her to be the starship with her. And sing our way through space together for thousands and thousands of years."

"It's just a dream, Elaine. You don't have to be afraid of it."

"They did it to her. They cut off her arms and legs and put her into the machines."

But no one's going to put you into a machine."

"I want to go outside," she said.

"You can't. It's raining."

"Damn the rain."

"I do, every day."

I'm not joking? She pulls me all the time now, even when I'm awake. She keeps pulling at me and making me fall asleep, and she sings to me, and I feel her pulling and pulling. If I could just go outside, I could hold on. I feel like I could hold on, if I could just—"

"Hry relax. Let me give you a—"
No! I don't want to sleep!"

Listen, Elaine. It's just a dream. You can't let it get to you like this. It's just the rain keeping you here. It makes you sleepy and so you keep dreaming this. But don't fight it. It's a beautiful dream in a way. Why not go with it?

She looked at me with terror in her eyes.

"You don't mean that. You don't want me to go."

"No. Of course I don't want you to go anywhere. But you won't, don't you see? It's a dream. Floating out there between the stars—"

"She's not floating. She's ramming her way through space so fast it makes me dizzy whenever she shows me."

"Then be dizzy. Think of it as your mind finding a way for you to run."

"You don't understand. Mr. Therapist. I thought you'd understand."

"I'm trying to."

"If I go with her, then I'll be dead."

I asked her nurse, "Who's been reading to her?"

"We all do, and volunteers from town. They like her. She always has someone to read to her."

You'd better supervise them more carefully. Somebody's been putting ideas in her head. About spaceships and dust and singing between the stars. It's scared her pretty bad."

The nurse frowned. "We approve everything they read. She's been reading that kind of things for years. It's never done her any harm before. Why now?"

The rain, I guess. Cooped up in here she's losing touch with reality."

The nurse nodded sympathetically and said, "I know. When she's asleep, she's doing the strangest things now."

"Like what? What kind of things?"

"Oh, singing these horrible songs."

"What are the words?"

There aren't any words. She just sort of hums. Only the melodies are awful. Not even like music. And her voice gets funny and raspy. She's completely asleep. She sleeps a lot now. Mercifully, I think. She's always impatient when she can't go outside."

The nurse obviously liked Elaine. It would be hard not to feel sorry for her, but Elaine insisted on being liked, and people liked her, those that could get over the horrible flatness of the sheets all around her trunk. "Listen," I said. "Can we bundle her up or something? Get her outside in spite of the rain?"

The nurse shook her head. "It isn't just the rain. It's cold out there. And the explosion that made her like she is—it messed her up inside. She isn't put together right. She doesn't have the strength to fight off any kind of disease at all. You understand—there's a good chance that exposure to that kind of weather would kill her eventually. And I won't take a chance on that."

"I'm going to be visiting her more often, then," I said. "As often as I can. She's got something going on in her head that's scaring her half to death. She thinks she's going to die."

"Oh, the poor darling," the nurse said. "Why would she think that?"

Doesn't matter. One of her imaginary friends may be getting out of hand."

"I thought you said they were harmless."

They were.

When I left the Milard County Rest Home that night, I stopped back in Elaine's room. She was asleep, and I heard her song. It was eerie. I could hear, now and then, themes from the bit of Copland music she had listened to. But it was distorted, and most of the music was unrecognizable—wasn't even music. Her voice was high and strange, and then suddenly it would change, would become low and raspy, and for a moment I'd clearly heard in her voice the sound of a vast engine coming through walls of metal, carried on slender metal rods, the sound of a great roar being swallowed up by a vast cushion of nothing. I pictured Elaine with wires coming out of her shoulders and hips, with her head encased in metal and her eyes closed in sleep, like her imaginary Anarsia, piloting the starship as if it were her own body. I could see that this would be attractive to Elaine, in a way. After all, she had been born this way. She had memories of running and playing, memories of feeding herself and dressing herself, perhaps even of learning to read, of sounding out the words as her fingers touched each letter. Even the false arms of a spaceship would be something to fill the great void.

Children's centers are not inside their bodies, their centers are outside, at the

point where the fingers of the left hand and the fingers of the right hand meet. What they touch is where they live, what they see is their self. And Elaine had lost herself in an explosion before she had the chance to move inside. With this strange dream of Anansa she was getting a soft back.

But a repellent self, for all that I walked in and sat by Elaine's bed, listening to her sing. Her body moved slightly, her back arching a little with the melody. High and light, low and rasping. The sounds alternated and I wondered what they meant. What was going on inside her to make this music come out?

"I'll go with her, then I'll be dead."

Of course she was afraid. I looked at the lump of flesh that filled the bed shapelessly below where her head emerged from the covers. Tired to change my perspective to see her body as she saw it, from above. It almost disappeared then, with the lengthening and the height of her ribs making her stomach and front of hips vanish into insignificance. Yet this was all she had, and if she believed—and certainly she seemed to—the surrendering to the fantasy of Anansa would mean the death of this pitiful body, its death any less frightening to those who have not been able to fully live? I doubt it. At least for Elaine, what life she had lived had been painful. She would not willingly trade it for a life of music and metal arms, locked in her own mind.

Except for the rain. Except that nothing was so real to her as the outside, as the trees and birds and distant hills, and as the breeze touching her with a violence she permitted to no living person. And with that reality the good part of her life, cut off from her by the rain, how long could she hold out against the incessant pulling of Anansa and her promise of arms and legs and eternal song?

I reached up, on a whim, and very gently lifted her eyelids.

Her eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling, not blinking.

I closed her eyes, and they remained closed.

I turned her head, and it stayed turned. She did not wake up. Just kept singing as if I had done nothing to her at all.

Catalepsy, or the beginning of catalepsy. She's losing her mind. I thought, and if I don't bring her back, keep her here somehow, Anansa will win, and the rest of me will be caring for a lump of mindless flesh for the next however many years they can keep this remnant of Elaine alive.

"I'll be back on Saturday. I told the administrator."

"Why so soon?"

"Elaine is going through a crisis of some kind," I explained. An imaginary woman from space wants to carry her off—that I didn't say. "Have the nurses keep her awake as much as they can. Read to her, play with her, talk to her. Her normal hours at night are enough. Avoid naps."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid for her, that's all. She could go catatonic on us at any time, I think. Her sleeping isn't normal. I want to have her watched all the time."

"This is really serious?"

"This is really serious."

On Friday it looked as if the clouds were breaking, but after only a few minutes of sunshine a huge new bank of clouds swept down from the northwest, and it was worse than before. I finished my work rather carelessly, stopping a sentence in the middle several times. One of my patients was annoyed with me. She squinted at me. "You're not paid to think about your woman troubles when you're talking to me." I apologized and tried to pay attention. She was a talker, my attention always wandered. But she was right in a way. I couldn't stop thinking of

Elaine. And my patient's saying that about woman troubles must have triggered something in my mind. After all, my relationship with Elaine was the longest and closest I had had with a woman in many years. If you could think of Elaine as a woman.

On Saturday I drove back to Millard County and found the nurses rather distraught. They didn't realize how much she was sleeping until they tried to stop her, they all said. She was dozing off for two or three naps in the mornings, even more in the afternoons. She went to sleep at night at seven-thirty and slept at least twelve hours. "Singing all the time. It's awful. Even at night she keeps it up. Singing and singing."

But she was awake when I went in to see her.

"I stayed awake for you."

Thanks, I said.

A Saturday visit. I must really be going bonkers.

Actually, no. But I don't like how sleepy you are.

She smiled wanly. "It isn't my idea."

I think my smile was more cheerful than hers. "And I think it's all in your head."

Think what you like, Doctor.

"I'm not a doctor. My degree says I'm a master."

How deep is the water outside? All



Tell her you've got a headache!"

this rain. Surely it's enough to keep a few dozen arks afloat. Is God destroying the world?"

"Unfortunately no. Though He has killed the engines on a few cars that went a little fast through the puddles."

"How long would it have to rain to fill up the world?"

"The world is round. It would all drip off the bottom."

She laughed. It was good to hear her laugh, but it ended too abruptly, and she looked at me fearfully. "I'm going, you know."

"You are?"

"I'm just the right size. She's measured me, and I fit perfectly. She has just the place for me. It's a good place, where I can hear the music of the dust for myself and learn to sing it. I'd have the directional engines."

I shook my head. "Grumpy the ice pig was cute. This isn't cute, Elaine."

"Did I ever say I thought Ananas was cute? Grumpy the ice pig was real, you know. My father made him out of crushed ice for a lullaby. He melted before they got the pig out of the ground. I don't make my friends up."

"Fuchsia the flower girl?"

"My mother would pinch blossoms off the fuchsias by our front door. We played with them like dolls in the grass."

"But not Ananas."

"Ananas came into my mind when I was asleep. She found me. I didn't make her up."

"Don't you see, Elaine, that's how the real hallucinations come? They feel like reality."

She shook her head. "I know all that. I've had the nurses read me psychology books. Ananas is—Ananas is other. She couldn't come out of my head. She's something else. She's real. I've heard her music. It isn't plain like Copland. It isn't false."

"Elaine, when you were asleep on Wednesday, you were becoming catatonic."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I felt you touch me. I felt you turn my head. I wanted to speak to you, to say good-bye. But she was singing, don't you see? She was singing. And now she lets me sing along. When I sing with her, I can feel myself travel out, like a spider along a single thread, cut into the place where she is. Into the darkness. It is lonely there, and black, and cold. But I know that at the end of the thread there she'll be, a friend for me forever."

"You're frightening me, Elaine."

There aren't any trees on her starship, you know. That's how I stay here. I think of the trees and the hills and the birds and the grass and the wind, and how I'd lose all of that. She gets angry at me, and a little hurt. But it keeps me here. Except now I can hardly remember the trees at all. I try to remember and it's like trying to remember the face of my mother. I can remember her dress and her hair, but her face is gone forever. Even when I look at a picture, it's a stranger. The trees are strangers to me now."

I stroked her forehead. At first she pulled her head away, then slid it back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I usually don't like people to touch me there."

"I won't," I said.

"No go ahead. I don't mind."

So I stroked her forehead again. It was cool and dry, and she lifted her head almost imperceptibly to receive my touch. Involuntarily I thought of what the old woman had said the day before. Woman troubles. I was touching Elaine, and I thought of making love to her. I immediately put the thought out of my mind.

"Hold me here," she said. "Don't let me go. I want to go so badly. But I'm not meant for that. I'm just the right size, but not the right shape. Those aren't my arms. I know what my arms felt like."

"I'll hold you if I can. But you have to help."

"No drugs. The drugs pull my mind away from my body. If you give me drugs, I'll die."

"Then what can I do?"

"Just keep me here, any way you can. Then we talked about nonsense, because we had been so serious, and it was as if she weren't having any problems at all. We got on the subject of the church meetings."

"I didn't know you were religious," I said.

"I'm not. But what else is there to do on Sunday? They sing hymns, and I sing with them. Last Sunday there was a sermon that really got to me. The preacher talked about Christ in the sepulcher. About Him being there three days before the angels came to let Him go. I've been thinking about that what it must have been like for Him, locked in a cave in the darkness, completely alone."

"Depressing."

"Not really. It must have been exhilarating for him, in a way it was true, you know. To be there on that stone bed, saying to Himself, 'They thought I was dead, but I'm here. I'm not dead.'"

"You make Him sound smug."

"Sure. Why not? I wonder if I'd feel like that if I were with Ananas."

Ananas again.

"I can see what you're thinking. You're thinking 'Ananas again.'"

"Yeah," I said. "I wish you'd erase her and go back to some more harmless friends."

Suddenly her face went angry and fierce.

"You can believe what you like. Just leave me alone."

I tried to apologize, but she wouldn't have any of it. She insisted on believing in the star woman. Finally I left, redoubting my cautions against letting her sleep. The nurses looked worried, too. They could see the change as easily as I could.

That night, because I was in Millard on a weekend, I called up Belinda. She wasn't married or anything at the moment. She came to my motel. We had dinner, made love, and watched television. She watched television that is, I lay on the bed, thinking. And so when the test pattern came on, and Belinda at last got up, beery and passionate, my mind was still on Elaine. As Belinda kissed and licked me and whispered stupidity in my ear, I imagined myself without arms and legs, I lay there, moving only my head.

"What's the matter, you don't want to?"

I shook off the mood. No need to disappoint Belinda—I was the one who had called her. I had a responsibility. Not much of one, though. That was what was nagging at me. I made love to Belinda slowly and carefully, but with my eyes closed. I kept superimposing Elaine's face on Belinda's. Woman troubles. Even though Belinda's fingers played up and down my back, I thought I was making love to Elaine. And the clumps of arms and legs didn't revolt me as much as I would have thought. Instead, I only felt sad. A deep sense of tragedy, of loss, as if Elaine were dead and I could have saved her like the prince in all the fairy tales, a loss so symbolic, and the princess awakens and lives happily ever after. And I hadn't done it. I had failed her. When we were finished, I cried.

"Oh, you poor sweetheart," Belinda said, her voice rich with sympathy. "What's wrong—you don't have to tell me. She cradled me for a while, and at last I went to sleep with my head pressed against her breasts. She thought I needed her. I suppose that's briefly, I did."

I did not go back to Elaine on Sunday as I had planned. I spent the entire day almost gazing. Instead of walking out the door, I sat

and watched the incredible array of terrible Sunday morning television. And when I finally did go out, fully intending to go to the real home and see how she was doing, I ended up driving luggage in the back of the car to my trailer where I went inside and again sat down and watched television.

Why couldn't I go to her?
Just keep me here, she had said. Any way you can, she had said.

And I thought I knew the way. That was the problem. In the back of my mind all this was much too real, and the fairy tales were wrong. The prince didn't wake her with a kiss. He awakened the princess with a promise. In his arms she would be safe forever. She awoke for the happily-ever-after. If she hadn't known it to be true, the princess would have preferred to sleep forever.

What was Elaine asking of me?
Why was I afraid of it?

Not my job. Unprofessional to get emotionally involved with a patient.

But then, when had I ever been a professional? I finally went to bed, wishing I had Belinda with me again, for whatever comfort she could bring. Why weren't all women like Belinda: soft and loving and understanding?

Yet as I drifted off to sleep, it was Elaine I remembered. Elaine's face and hideous reproachful slump of a body that followed me through all my dreams.

And she followed me when I was awake through my regular rounds on Monday and Tuesday and at last it was Wednesday, and still I was afraid to go to the Millard County Rest Home. I didn't get there until afternoon. Late afternoon, and the rain was coming down as hard as ever, and there were lakes of standing water in the fetid torrents rushing through the unprepared gutters of the town.

You're late, the administrator said.
Rain, I answered, and he nodded. But he looked worried.

We hoped you'd come yesterday, but we couldn't reach you anywhere. It's Elaine.

And I knew that my delay had served its damnable purpose, exactly as I expected.

She hadn't woken up since Monday morning. She just lies there, singing. We've got her on an IV. She's asleep.

She was nodding asleep. I sent the others out of the room.

Elaine, I said.
Nothing.

I called her name again, several times. I touched her, rocked her head back and

forth. Her head stayed wherever I placed it. And the song went on, softly, high and then low, pure and then gravelly. I covered her mouth. She sang on, even with her mouth closed, as if nothing were the matter.

I pulled down her sheet and pushed a pin into her belly, then into the thin flesh at her collarbone. No response. I slapped her face. No response. She was gone. I saw her again, connected to a starship, only this time I understood better. It wasn't her body that was the right size; it was her mind. And it was her mind that had followed the slender spider's thread out to Anarsa, who waited to give her a body.

A job.
Shock therapy? I imagined her already-deformed body leaping and arching as the electricity coursed through her. It would accomplish nothing, except to torture and unthinkingly crush. I couldn't think of anything that could bring her back from where she had gone. In a way, I think, I even believed in Anarsa, for the moment. I called her name.

Anarsa, let her go. Let her come back to me. Please. I needed her.

Why had I cried in Belinda's arms? Oh, yes. Because I had seen the princess and let her lie there unawakened, because the happily-ever-after was so diametrically much work.

I did not do it in the fever of the first realization that I had lost her. It was no act of passion or sudden fear or grief. I sat beside her bed for hours, looking at her weak and helpless body, now so empty. I wished for her eyes to open on their own, for her to wake up and say, "Hey, would you believe the dream I had!" For her to say, "Foolish you, didn't I? It was really hard when you poked me with pins, but I fooled you."

But she hadn't fooled me.

And so, finally, not with passion but in despair, I stood up and leaned over her, leaned my hands on either side of her and pressed my cheek against hers and whispered in her ear. I promised her everything. I could think of. I promised her no more rain forever. I promised her trees and flowers and hills and birds and the wind for as long as she liked. I promised to take her away from the rest home, to take her to see things she could only have dreamed of before.

And then at last, with my voice hoarse from pleading with her, with her hair wet with my tears, I promised her the only thing that might bring her back. I promised her me. I promised her love forever, stronger than any songs Anarsa could sing.

And it was then that the monstrous song

tell started. She did not awaken, but the song ended, and she moved on her own. Her head rocked to the side, and she seemed to sleep normally, not cataleptically. I waited by her bedside all night. I fell asleep in the chair, and one of the nurses covered me. I was still there when I was awakened in the morning by Elaine's voice.

"What a liar you are!" it's still raining.

It was a feeling of power, to know that I had called someone back from places far darker than death. Her life was painful, and yet my promise of devotion was enough, apparently, to compensate. This was how I understood it, at least. This was what made me feel exhilarated, what kept me blind and deaf to what had really happened.

I was not the only one repaying. The nurses made a great fuss over her, and the administrator promised to write up a glowing report. Puffish, he said.

It's too personal, I said. But in the back of my mind I was already trying to figure out a way to get the case into print, to gain something for my career. I was ashamed of myself for twisting what had been an honest, heartfelt commitment into personal advancement. But I couldn't ignore the sudden respect I was receiving from people to whom, only hours before, I had been merely ordinary.

It's too personal, I repeated firmly. "I have no intention of publishing."

And to my disgust I found myself relishing the administrator's respect for that decision. There was no escape from my swelling self-satisfaction. Not as long as I stayed around those determined to give me cheap payoffs. Ever the wise psychologist, I returned to the only person who would give me gratitude instead of admiration. The gratitude I had earned, I thought. I went back to Elaine.

He, she said. I wondered where you had gone.

Not far, I said. Just visiting with the Nobel Prize committee.

They want to reward you for bringing me here?

Oh, no. They had been planning to give me the award for having convinced a genuine alien being from outer space. Instead, I blew it and brought you back. They're quite upset.

She looked flustered. It wasn't like her to look flustered—usually she came back with another quip. "But what will they do to you?"

"Probably boil me in oil. That's the usual."

thing. Though, maybe they've found a way to boil me in solar energy. It's cheaper! A feeble joke. But she didn't get it.

"This isn't the way she said it was—the she said it was—"

She tried to ignore the dull fear that suddenly churned in my stomach. Be analytical. I thought. She could be anyone.

"She said? Who said?" I asked.
Elaine felt silent. I reached out and touched her forehead. She was perspiring.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're upset."
"I should have known."
"Known what?"

She shook her head and turned away from me.

I knew what it was. I thought. I knew what it was, but we could surely cope. Elaine. I said, "you aren't completely cured, are you? You haven't got rid of Anansa, have you? You don't have to hide it from me. Sure, I would have loved to think you'd been completely cured, but that would have been too much of a miracle. Do I look like a miracle worker? We've just made progress, that's all. I brought you back from cataplexy. We'll free you of Anansa eventually."

Still she was silent, staring at the rainy window.

"You don't have to be embarrassed about pretending to be completely cured. It was very kind of you. It made me feel very good for a little while. But I'm a grown-up. I can cope with a little disappointment. Besides, you're awake, you're back, and that's all that matters." Grown-up? hell! I was torn, by disappointed, and ashamed that I wasn't more sincere in what I was saying. No cure after all. No hero. No magic. No great achievement. Just a psychologist who was after all not extraordinary.

But I refused to pay too much attention to those feelings. Be a professional, I told myself. She needs your help.

"So don't go feeling guilty about it."

She turned back to face me, her eyes full. "Guilty? She almost said 'Guilty'." Her eyes did not leave my face, though I doubted she could see me well through the tears beaming her lashes.

"You tried to do the right thing," I said.

"Did I? Did I really?" She smiled bitterly. It was strange smile for her, and for a terrible moment she no longer looked like my Elaine, my bright young patient. I meant to play with her," she said. "I wanted her with me, she was so alive, and when she finally pinned herself to the ship, she sang and danced and swung her arms, and I said 'This is what I've needed. This is what I've

craved all my centuries lost in the songs. But then I hear you."

"Anansa," I said, realizing at that moment who was with me.

"I heard you crying out to her. Do you think I made up my mind quickly? She heard you, but she wouldn't come. She wouldn't trade her new arms and legs for anything. They were so new. But I'd had them for long enough. What I'd never had was—you."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Out there," she said. "She sings better than I ever did." She looked wistful for a moment, then smiled ruefully. "And I'm hate. Only I made a bad bargain, didn't I? Because I didn't fool you. You won't want me now. It's Elaine you want, and she's gone. I left her alone out there. She won't mind, not for a long time. But then—then she will. Then she'll know I cheated her."

The voice was Elaine's voice, the tragic little body her body. But now I knew I had not succeeded at all. Elaine was gone, in the infinite outer space where the mind hides to escape from itself. And in her place—Anansa. A stranger.

"You cheated her?" I said. "How did you cheat her?"

It never changes. In a while you learn all the songs, and they never change. Nothing moves. You go on forever until all the stars fail, and yet nothing ever moves.

I moved my hand and put it to my hair. I was startled at my own trembling touch on my head.

"Oh, God," I said. They were just words, not a supplication.

"You hate me," she said.

"Hate her? Hate my little, mad Elaine? Oh no. I had another object for my hate. I hated the rain that had cut her off from all that kept her sane. I hated her parents for not leaving her home the day they let their car drive them on to death. But most of all I remembered my days of hiding from Elaine, my days of resisting her need, of pretending that I didn't remember her or think of her or need her, too. She must have wondered why I was so long in coming. Wondered and finally given up hope, finally realized that there was no one who would hold her. And so she left, and when I finally came, the only person waiting inside her body was Anansa, the imaginary friend who had come temptingly to life. I knew whom to hate. I thought I would cry. I even buried my face in the sheet where her leg would have been. But I did not cry. I just sat there, the sheet harsh against my face, hating myself.

Her voice was like a gentle hand, a pleading hand touching me. "I'd undo it if I could," she said. "But I can't. She's gone and I'm here. I came because of you. I came to see the trees and the grass and the birds and your smile. The happily-ever-after. That was what she had lived for, you know. All she lived for. Please smile at me."

I felt warmth on my hair. I lifted my head. There was no rain in the window. Sunlight rose and fell on the wrinkles of the sheet.

"Let's go outside," I said.

"It stopped raining," she said.

A bit late, isn't it? I answered. But I smiled at her.

"You can call me Elaine," she said. "You won't tell, will you?"

I shook my head. No I wouldn't tell. She was safe enough. I wouldn't tell because then they would take her away to a place where psychiatrists reigned but did not know enough to rule. I imagined her confined among others who had also made their escape from reality, and I knew that I couldn't tell anyone. I also knew I couldn't confess failure, not now.

Besides, I hadn't really completely failed. There was still hope. Elaine wasn't really gone. She was still there, hidden in her own mind, looking out through this imaginary person she had created to take her place. Someday I would find her and bring her home. After all, even Grunty the ice pig had melted.

I noticed that she was shaking her head. "You won't find her," she said. "You won't bring her home. I won't melt and disappear. She is gone, and you couldn't have prevented it."

I smiled. "Elaine, I said."

And then I realized that she had answered thoughts I hadn't put into words.

"That's right," she said. "Let's be honest with each other. You might as well. You can't let me."

I shook my head. For a moment in my confusion and despair I had believed it all. Believed that Anansa was real. But that was nonsense. Of course Elaine knew what I was thinking. She knew me better than I knew myself. "Let's go outside," I said. A failure and a cripple, out to enjoy the sunlight, which fell equally on the just and the unjustifiable.

"I don't mind," she said. "Whatever you want to believe. Elaine or Anansa. Maybe it's better if you still look for Elaine. Maybe it's better if you let me fool you after all."

The worst thing about the fantasies of the mentally ill is that they're so damned con-

ascent. They never let up. They never give you any rest.

"I'm Elaine," she said, smiling. "I'm Elaine, pretending to be Anansa. You love me. That's what I came for. You promised to bring me home, and you did. Take me outside. You made it stop raining for me. You did everything you promised, and I'm home again, and I promise I'll never leave you."

She hasn't left me. I come to see her every Wednesday as part of my work, and every Saturday and Sunday as the best part of my life. I take her driving with me sometimes, and we talk constantly, and I read to her and bring her books for the nurses to read to her. None of them know that she is still *unwell*—to them she's Elaine, happier than ever, pathetically delighted at every sight and sound and smell and taste and every texture that they touch against her cheek. Only I know that she believes she is not Elaine. Only I know that I have made no progress at all since then, that in moments of terrible honesty I call her Anansa, and she sadly answers me.

But in a way I'm content. Very little has changed between us, really. And after a few weeks I realized, with certainty, that she was happier now than she had ever been before. After all, she had the best of all pos-

sible worlds for her. She could tell herself that the real Elaine was off in space somewhere, dancing and singing and hearing songs, with arms and legs at last, while the poor girl who was confined to the limbless body at the Milard County Rest Home was really an alien who was very, very happy to have even that limited body.

And as for me, I kept my commitment to her and I'm happier for it. I'm still human—I still take another woman into my bed from time to time. But Anansa doesn't mind. She even suggested it only a few days after she woke up. Go back to Belinda sometimes, she said. "Belinda loves you too, you know. I won't mind at all." I still can't remember when I spoke to her of Belinda, but at least she didn't mind, and so there aren't really any disappointments in my life. Except.

Except that I'm not God. I would like to be God. I would make some changes.

When I go to the Milard County Rest Home, I never enter the building first. She is never in the building. I walk around the outside and look across the lawn by the trees. The wheelchair is always there. I can tell it from the others by the pillows, which glaze white in the sunlight. I never call out. In all moments she always sees me, and the nurses wheel her around and push the

chair across the lawn.

She comes as she has come hundreds of times before. She plunges toward me, and I concentrate on watching her, so that my mind will not see my Elaine surrounded by blackness, plunging through space, gathering dust, gathering songs, leaping and dancing with her new arms and legs that she loves better than me. Instead I watch the wheelchair, watch the smile on her face. She is happy to see me, so delighted with the world outside that her body cannot contain her. And when my imagination will not be restrained, I am God for a moment. I see her running toward me, her arms waving. I give her a left hand, a right hand, delicate and strong. I put a long and girlish left leg on her, and one just as sturdy on the right.

And then, one by one, I take them all away.

Orson Scott Card last year became the first author to be honored as a member of BOSF's Celebrated Circle. (Harlan Ellison is so honored in this volume.) Two novels by Card were published earlier this year: *The Withering Chronicle* (Ace Books) and *Hart's Hope* (Berkley), a science fantasy. A native of Washington, Card lives with his wife and three children in North Carolina.



JOHNNY MNEMONIC

*He had information that
the gangsters wanted desperately, even
if they had to kill him*

BY WILLIAM GIBSON

I put the shotgun in an Adidas bag and padded it out with four pairs of tennis socks, not my style at all, but that was what I was aiming for. If they think you're crude, go technical; if they think you're technical, go crude. I'm a very technical boy. So I decided to get as crude as possible. These days, though, you have to be pretty technical before you can even aspire to crudeness. I'd had to turn both those twelve-gauge shells from brass stock, on a lathe, and then load them myself. I'd had to dig up an old microfiche with instructions for handloading cartridges; I'd had to build a lever-action press to seat the primers—all very tricky. But I knew they'd work. The men was set for the Dome at twenty-three hundred, but I rode the tube three stops past the closest platform and walked back. Immaculate procedure.

I checked myself out in the chrome siding of a coffee kiosk, your basic sharp-faced Caucasian with a nuff of stiff, dark hair. The gets at Under the Knife were big on Sony Mios, and it was getting harder to keep them from adding that nice suggestion of repeat-the-folds. It probably wouldn't fool Ralf Face, but it might get me next to his table.

The Dome is a single narrow space with a bar down one side and tables along the other, thick with pimps and henchmen and an arcane array of dealers. The Magnetic Dog Sisters were on the door that night, and I didn't relish trying to get out past them if things

didn't work out. They were two meters tall and thin as greyhounds. One was black and the other white, but aside from that they were as nearly identical as cosmetic surgery could make them. They'd been lovers for years and were bad news in a future. I was never quite sure which one had originally been mine.

Ralf was sitting at his usual table. Owing me a lot of money I had hundreds of megabytes slashed in my head on an idiot/savant basis, information I had no conscious access to. Ralf had left it there. He hadn't, however, come back for it. Only Ralf could retrieve the data, with a code phrase of his own invention. I'm not cheap to begin with, but my overtime on storage is astronomical. And Ralf had been very scarce.

Then I'd heard that Ralf Face wanted to put out a contract on me. So I'd arranged to meet him in the Dome, but I'd rearranged it as Edward Box, aristocratic Impromptu, laze of Rio and Peking.

The Dome stank of bile, a metallic tang of nervous tension. Muscleboys scattered through the crowd were flexing stock parts at one another and trying on thin, cold pins, some of them so lost under superstructures of muscle that their outlines weren't really human.

Pardon me. Pardon me, friends. Just Eddie Box here, Fast Eddie the Importer, with his professionally nondescript gym bag, and please ignore the sat, just wide enough to admit his right hand



PAINTING BY ETIENNE SANDORFI

Raffi wasn't alone. Eighty kilos of blond California beef perched alertly in the chair next to his, marital arts written all over him.

Fast Eddie Blix was in the chair opposite them before the beef's hands were off the table. "You black belt?" I asked eagerly. He nodded, blue eyes running an automatic scanning pattern between my eyes and my hands. "Me too," I said. "Got mine here in the bag. And I shoved my hand through the seat and thumbed the safety off. Click. Double twelve-gauge with the triggers wired together."

That's a gun. Raffi said, putting a plump restraining hand on his boy's taut, blue nylon chest. Johnny has an antique beam in his bag. So much for Edward Box.

I guess he'd always been Raffi. Something or Other, but he owed his acquired surname to a singular vanity. Built some thing like an overripe pear, he'd won the once-famous face of Christian White for twenty years—Christian White of the Anyan Reggae Band, Sony Mus to his generation, and final champion of race rock. I'm a whiz at this.

Christian White, classic pop face with a singer's high-definition muscles, chiseled cheekbones, Angelic in one light, handsomely depraved in another. But Raffi's eyes lived behind that face, and they were mild and cold and black.

Please, he said, "let's work this out like businessmen." His voice was marked by a homely prehearsal sincerity, and the corners of his beautiful Christian White mouth were always wet. "Lewie here," nodding in the beef's direction, is a meatball. Lewie took this impassively, looking like something built from a kit. "You aren't a meatball, Johnny."

Sure I am, Raffi, a nice meatball chock-full of implants where you can store your dirty laundry while you go off shopping for people to kill me. From my end of this bag, Raffi, it looks like you've got some explaining to do.

It's the last batch of product, Johnny. He sighed deeply. In my role as broker—"Fence, I corrected.

As broker, I'm usually very careful as to sources."

You buy only from those who steal the best. Got it?

He sighed again. "I try," he said wearily "not to buy from fools. This time I'm afraid, I've done that." The third sigh was the cue for Lewie to trigger the neural disruptor they'd taped under my side of the table.

I put everything I had into curling the in-

dex finger of my right hand, but I no longer seemed to be connected to it. I could feel the metal of the gun and the foam-padded tape I'd wrapped around the stubby grip, but my hands were cool wax, inert and inert. I was hoping Lewie was a true meatball, thick enough to go for the gym bag and snag my rigid trigger finger, but he wasn't.

"We've been very worried about you, Johnny. Very worried. You see, that's Yakuza property you have there. A fool took it from them, Johnny. A dead fool."

Lewie giggled.

It all made sense then, an ugly kind of sense, like bags of wet sand settling around my head. Killing wasn't Raffi's style. Lewie wasn't even Raffi's style. But he'd got himself stuck between the Sons of the Neon Chrysanthemum and something that belonged to them—or more likely something of theirs that belonged to someone else. Raffi, of course, could use the code phrase to throw me into idiot-savant and I'd split their hot program without remembering a single quarter tone. For a loner like Raffi that would ordinarily have been enough. But not for the Yakuza. The Yakuza would know about Squids, for one thing, and they wouldn't want to worry about one lifting those dim and permanent traces of their program out of my head. I didn't know very much about Squids, but I'd heard stories, and I made it a point never to repeat them to my clients. No, the Yakuza wouldn't like that. It looked too much like evidence. They hadn't got where they were by leaving evidence around. Or alive.

Lewie was grinning. I think he was visualizing a point just behind my forehead and imagining how he could get there the hard way.

"Hey," said a low voice, feminine from somewhere behind my right shoulder, "you cowboys sure aren't having too lively a time."

"Pack it, bitch," Lewie said, his tanned face very still. Raffi looked blank.

Lighten up. You want to buy some good free base? She pulled up a chair and quickly sat before either of them could stop her. She was barely more than my fixed field of vision, a thin girl with mirrored glasses, her black hair cut in a rough shag. She wore black leather, open over a T-shirt steeled diagonally with stripes of red and black. "Eight thou a gram weight."

Lewie snorted his exasperation and tried to slip her out of the chair. Somehow he didn't quite connect, and her hand came up

and seemed to brush his wrist as it passed. Bright blood sprayed the table. He was clutching his wrist where knuckle light blood trickled from between his fingers. But hadn't her hand been empty?

He was going to need a tendon stapler. He stood up carefully, without bothering to push his chair back. The chair toppled backward, and he stepped out of my line of sight without a word.

He better get a medic to look at that, she said. "That's a nasty cut."

"You have no idea," said Raffi, suddenly sounding very tired, the depths of shit you have just gotten yourself into.

No kidding? Mystery. I got real excited by mysteries. Like why your friend here is so quiet. Frozen like. Or what the thing here is for," and she held up the little control unit that she'd somehow taken from Lewie. Raffi looked ill.

"You ah, want maybe a quarter million to give me that and take a walk? A fat hand came up to gently stroke his pale, lean face nervously.

"What I want," she said, snapping her lips, "is to see that the unit spun and glittered." "Is work. A job. Your boy hurt his wrist. But a quarter I do for a retainer."

Raffi let his breath out explosively and began to laugh, exposing teeth that hadn't been kept up to the Christian White standard. Then he snatched the disruptor off.

"Two million," I said.

My kind of man, she said and laughed. "What's in the bag?"

A shotgun."

"Crude. It just might have been a complement."

Raffi said nothing at all.

Name's Miltons. Moby Miltons. You want to get out of here, boss? People are starting to stare. She stood up. She was wearing leather jeans the color of dried blood.

And I saw for the first time that the mirrored lenses were surgical rays, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones, making her eyes in their sockets. I saw my new face binned there.

I'm Johnny, I said. "We're taking Mr. Face with us."

He was outside, waiting. Looking like your standard tourist tech, in plastic zone and a silly Hawaiian shirt printed with blow-ups of his firm's most popular microprocessor, a mild little guy, the kind most likely to wind up drunk on tequila in a bar that puts out miniature rice crackers with seaweed garnish. He looked like the kind who sing the

corporate anthem and cry, who shake hands endlessly with the bartender. And the pimps and the dealers would leave him alone, pegging him as innately conservative. Not up for much, and careful with his credit when he was.

The way I figured it later, they must have amputated part of his left thumb, somewhere behind the first joint, replacing it with a prosthetic tip, and cored the stump, fitting it with a spool and socket molded from one of the Ono-Sendai diamond analogs. Then they'd carefully wound the spool with three meters of monomolecular filament.

Molly got into some kind of exchange with the Magnetic Dog Sisters, giving me a chance to usher Ralfi through the door with the gym bag pressed lightly against the base of his spine. She seemed to know them. I heard the black one laugh.

I glanced up, out of some passing reflex, maybe because I've never got used to it, to the soaring arcs of light and the shadows of the geodesics above them. Maybe that saved me.

Ralfi kept walking, but I don't think he was trying to escape. I think he'd already given up. Probably he already had an idea of what we were up against.

I looked back down just in time to see him explode.

Playback on full recall shows Ralfi stepping forward as the little tech slides out of nowhere, smiling. Just a suggestion of a bow, and his left thumb falls off. It's a con-junk trick. The thumb hangs suspended. Mirrors? Wires? And Ralfi stops, his back to us, dark crescents of sweat under the armpits of his pale summer suit. He knows, he must have known. And then the jock-shop thumbtip heavy as lead, arcs out in a lightning yo-yo trick, and the invisible thread connecting it to the killer's hand passes laterally through Ralfi's skull, just above his eyebrows, whips up, and descends, slicing the pear-shaped torso diagonally from shoulder to rib cage. Cuts so fine that no blood flows, until synapses misfire and the first tremors surrender the body to gravity.

Ralfi tumbled apart in a pink cloud of fluids, the three mismatched sections falling forward onto the tiled pavement. They rolled in total silence.

I brought the gym bag up, and my hand convulsed. The recoil nearly broke my wrist.

It must have been raining, ribbons of water cascaded from a ruptured geodesic and splattered on the tile behind us. We

crouched in the narrow gap between a surgical boutique and an antique shop. She'd just edged one mirrored eye around the corner to report a single Volks module in front of the Dome, red lights flashing. They were sweeping Ralfi up. Asking questions.

I was covered in scorched white tuff. The tennis socks. The gym bag was a ragged plastic cuff around my wrist. I don't see how the hell I missed him.

"Cause he's fast. So fast. She hugged her knees and rocked back and forth on her boot heels. "His nervous system's jacked up. He's factory custom." She grinned and gave a little squeal of delight. "I'm gonna get that boy tonight. He's the best number one, top dollar, state of the art."

"What you're going to get, for this boy's two million, is my ass out of here. Your boyfriend had there was mostly grown in a vat in Chiba City. He's a Yakuza assassin."

"Chiba. Yeah. See, Molly's been Chiba too. And she showed me her hands, fingers slightly spread. Her fingers were slender tapered, very white against the polished burgundy nails. Ten blades, snicked straight out from their recesses beneath her nails, each one a narrow, double-edged scalpel in pale blue steel.

I'd never spent much time in Nighttown. Nobody there had anything to pay me to remember, and most of them had a lot they paid regularly to forget. Generations of sharpshooters had chipped away at the neon until the maintenance crews gave up. Even at noon the arcs were soot-black against lamplit pearl.

Where do you go when the world's wealthiest criminal order is leaning for you with calm, distant fingers? Where do you hide from the Yakuza, so powerful that it owns comets and at least three shuttles? The Yakuza is a true multinational, like ITT and Ono-Sendai. Fifty years before I was born, the Yakuza had already absorbed the Trade, the Mafia, the Union Corse.

Molly had an answer. You hide in the Pit, in the lowest circle, where any outside influence generates swift, concerning ripples of raw menace. You hide in Nighttown. Better yet, you hide above Nighttown, because the Pit's inverted, and the bottom of its bowl touches the sky, the sky that Nighttown never sees, sweating under its own firmament of acrylic resin, up where the Lo Tekis crouch in the dark like gargoyle-black-market cigarette flares dangling from their lips.

She had another answer, too. So you're locked up good and tight,

Johnny-san? No way to get that program without the password? She led me into the shadows that waited beyond the bright tube platform. The concrete walls were overlaid with graffiti, years of them twisting into a single microscrawl of rage.

The stored data are led in through a modified series of microsurgical contra-asthma prostheses. I reeled off a numb version of my standard sales pitch. "Client's code is stored in a special chip, bearing Squids, which we in the trade don't like to talk about. There's no way to recover your phrase. Can't drug it out, cut it out, torture it. I don't know it, never did."

Squids? Crawly thing with arms? We emerged into a deserted street market. Shadowy figures watched us from across a makeshift square, littered with fish heads and rotting fruit.

Superconducting quantum interference detectors. Used them in the war to find submarines, suss out enemy cyber systems.

"Yeah? Navy stuff? From the war? Squid it read that chip of yours? She'd stopped walking, and I felt her eyes on me behind those twin mirrors.

Even the primitive models could measure a magnetic field a billionth the strength of geomagnetic force, it's like pulling a whisper out of a cheering stadium."

Cops can do that already, with parabolic microphones and lasers. "But your data's still secure." Pride in profession. "No government'll let their cops have Squids, not even the security heavies. Too much chance of interdepart mental funnies, they're too likely to water-gate you."

"Navy stuff," she said, and her grin gleamed in the shadows. "Navy stuff, I got a friend down here who was in the Navy. Name's Jones. I think you'd better meet him. He's a junkie, though. So we'll have to take him something."

"A junkie?"

"A dolphin."

He was more than a dolphin, but from another dolphin's point of view he might have seemed like something less. I watched him swirling sluggishly in his galvanized tank. Water slopped over the side, wetting my shoes. He was surplus from the last war. A cyborg.

He rose out of the water, showing us the crusted plates along his sides, a kind of visual pun, his grace nearly lost under articulated armor, clumsy and prehistoric. Ten

deformities on either side of his skull had been engineered to house sensor units. Silver lesions gleamed on exposed sections of his gray-white hide.

Molly whistled. Jones thrashed his tail, and more water cascaded down the side of the tank.

"What is this place?" I peered at vague shapes in the dark, rusting chainlink and things under tarps. Above the tank hung a clumsy wooden framework, crossed and recrossed by rows of dusty Christmas lights.

"Funland. Zoo and carnival rides. Talk with the War Whale! All that. Some whale Jones is."

Jones reared again and fixed me with a sad and ancient eye.

"How's he talk?" Suddenly I was anxious to go.

"That's the catch. Say hi, Jones." And all the bulbs lit simultaneously. They were flashing red, white, and blue.

RWBWRWB
RWBWRWB
RWBWRWB
RWBWRWB
RWBWRWB

"Good with symbols, see, but the code's restricted. In the Navy they had him wired into an audiovisual display." She drew the narrow package from a jacket pocket. "Pursht, Jones. Want it?" He froze in the water and started to sink. I felt a strange panic, remembering that he wasn't a fish, that he could drown. "We want the key to Johnny's bank, Jones. We want it fast."

The lights flickered, died.
"Go for it, Jones!"

B
BBBBBBBB
B
B
B
B

Blue bulbs, on/off/on
Darkness.

"Pure! It's clean. Come on, Jones."

WWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWW

White sodium glare washed her features stark monochrome, shadows cleaving from her cheekbones:

R RRRR
R R
RRRRRRRR
R R
RRRR R

The arms of the red swastika were twisted in her silver glasses. "Give it to him!" I said. "We've got it!"

Raffi Face. No magnation.
Jones heaved half his armored bulk over the edge of his tank and I thought the metal would give way. Molly stabbed him overhand with the syrette, driving the needle between two plates. Propellant hissed. Patterns of light exploded, sparring across the frame and then fading to black.

We left him drifting, rolling lazily in the dark water. Maybe he was dreaming of his war in the Pacific, of the cyber mines he'd swept, nosing gently into their circuitry with the Squid he'd used to pick Raffi's password from the chip buried in my head.

"I can see them slipping up when he was demobbed, letting him out of the Navy with that gear intact, but how does a cybernetic dolphin get wired to smack?"

"The war," she said. "They all were. Navy did it. How else you get 'em working for you?"

"I'm not sure this profiles as good business," the pirate said, angling for better money. "Target specs on a consat that isn't in the book—"

Waste my time and you won't profile at all, said Molly, leaning across his scarred plastic desk to prod him with her forefinger.

So maybe you want to buy your micro-waves somewhere else? He was a tough kid, behind his Mao-job. A Nightowner by birth, probably.

Her hand blurred down the front of his jacket, completely saving a lapel without even rumpling the fabric.

"So we got a deal or not?"

"Deal," he said, staring at his ruined lapel with what he must have hoped was only polite interest. "Deal."

While I checked the two recorders we'd bought, she extracted the slip of paper I'd given her from the zippered wrist pocket of her jacket. She unfolded it and read silently, moving her lips. She shrugged. "This is it?"

"Shoot," I said, punching the record studs of the two decks simultaneously.

"Christian White," she recited, "and his Aryan Reggae Band."

Faithful Raffi, a fan to his dying day.
Transition to idiosyncratic mode is always less abrupt than I expect it to be. The pirate broadcaster's front was a failing travel agency in a pastel cube that boasted a desk, three chairs, and a faded poster of a Swiss orbital spa. A pair of toy birds with

blown-glass bodies and tin legs were sipping monotonously from a styrofoam cup of water on a ledge beside Molly's shoulder. As I phased into mode, they accelerated gradually until their Day-Glo-feathered crowns became solid arcs of color. The LEDs that told seconds on the plastic wall clock had become meaningless pulsing grids, and Molly and the Mao-faced boy grew hazy, their arms blurring occasionally in insect-quick ghosts of gesture. And then it all faded to cool gray static and an endless tone poem in an artificial language.

I sat and sang dead Raffi's stolen program for three hours.

The mall runs forty kilometers from end to end, a ragged overlap of Fuller domes, looking what was once a suburban artery. If they turn off the arcs on a clear day, a gray approximation of sunlight filters through layers of acrylic, a view like the prison sketches of Giovanni Pratesi. The three southernmost kilometers roof Nighttown. Nighttown pays no taxes, no utilities. The neon arcs are dead, and the geodesics have been smoked black by decades of cooking fires. In the nearly total darkness of a Nightown room, who notices a few dozen mad children lost in the rafters?

We'd been climbing for two hours, up concrete stairs and steel ladders with perforated rungs, past abandoned galletries and dust-covered tools. We'd started in what looked like a doused maintenance yard, stacked with triangular roofing segments. Everything there had been covered with that same uniform layer of spraybomb graffiti: gang names, initials, dates back to the turn of the century. The graffiti followed us up, gradually thinning until a single name was repeated at intervals. LO TEK, in dripping black capitals.

"Who's Lo Tek?"

"Not us, boss." She climbed a shivering aluminum ladder and vanished through a hole in a sheet of congealed plastic. "Low technique, low technology." The plastic muffled her voice. I followed her up, nursing my aching wrist. Lo Tek, they'd think that shotgun trick of yours was effete.

An hour later I dragged myself up through another hole. This one sawn crookedly in a sagging sheet of plywood, and met my first Lo Tek.

"S'okay," Molly said, her hand brushing my shoulder. "It's just Dog Hey Dog." In the narrow beam of her taped flashlight, he regarded us with one eye and slowly extruded a thick length of grayish tongue, look-

ing huge canines. I wondered how they wrote off tooth-bud transplants from Doberman as low technology. Immunosuppressives don't exactly grow on trees.

"Moll." Dental augmentation impeded his speech. A string of saliva dangled from his twisted lower lip. "Heard ya comin'. Long time." He might have been fifteen, but the lanks and a bright mosaic of scars combined with the gaping socket to present a mask of total bestiality. It had taken time and a certain kind of creativity to assemble that face, and his posture told me he enjoyed living behind it. He wore a pair of decaying jeans, black with grime and shiny along the creases. His chest and feet were bare. He did something with his mouth that approximated a grin. "Been followed, you."

Fair off, down in Nighttown, a water ven dored onto his trade.

"Strings jumping, Dog?" She swung her flash to the side, and I saw then corded tend to eyeballs, cords that ran to the edges and vanished.

"Kill the fuckin' light!"
She snapped it off.

"How come the one who's followin' you's got no light?"

"Doesn't need it. That one's bad news. Dog. Your senses give him a tumble, they'll come home in easy-to-carry sections."

"This a friend, Moll?" He sounded uneasy. I heard his foot shift on the worn plywood.

"No. But he's mine. And this one—slapping my shoulder, he's a friend. Got that?"

"Sure," he said, without much enthusiasm, padding the platform's edge where the eyeballs were. He began to pluck out some kind of message on the taut cords.

Nighttown spread beneath us like a toy village for rats. Any windows showed candlelight with only a few harsh, bright squares lit by battery lanterns and carbide lamps. I imagined the old men at their endless games of dominoes under warm, fat drops of water that fell from wet wash hung out on poles between the plywood shanties. Then I tried to imagine him climbing patiently up through the darkness in his zoned and ugly tourist shirt, blind and unharmed. How was he tracking us?

"Good," said Moll. "He smells us."

"Smoke?" Dog dragged a crumpled pack from his pocket and pried out a flattened cigarette. I squinted at the trademark while he lit it for me with a kitchen match.

Yheyuan filters. Beijing Cigarette Factory. I decided that the Lo Tek's were black marketers. Dog and Moll went back to their argument, which seemed to revolve around Moll's desire to use some particular piece of Lo Tek real estate.

"I've done you a lot of favors, man. I want that floor. And I want the music."

"You're not Lo Tek."

This must have been going on for the better part of a twisted kilometer. Dog leading us along swaying catwalks and up rope ladders. The Lo Tek's teach their webs and huddling places to the city's fabric with thick coils of epoxy and sleep above the abyss in mesh hammocks. Their country is so often used that in places it consists of little more than holds for hands and feet, down into geodesic struts.

The Killing Floor, she called it. Scrambling after her, my new Eddie Bax shoes slipping on worn metal and damp plywood. I wondered how it could be any more lethal than the rest of the territory. At the same time I sensed that Dog's protests were ritual and that she already expected to get whatever it was she wanted.

Somewhere beneath us Jones would be circling his tank, feeling the first twinges of junk sickness. The police would be boring the Dromo regulars with questions about Reik. What did he do? Who was he with before he stepped outside? And the Yakuza would be setting its ghostly bulk over the city's data banks, probing for faint images of me reflected in numbered accounts, securities transactions, bills for utilities. We're an information economy. They teach you that in school. What they don't tell you is that it's impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits, seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified.

But by now the pirate would have shuffled our message into line for blackbox transmission to the Yakuza console. A simple message. Call off the dogs or we will bend your program.

The program. I had no idea what it contained. I still don't. I only sing the song with no comprehension. It was probably research data, the Yakuza being given to advanced forms of industrial espionage. A genuine business, stealing from Ono-Senda as a matter of course and politely holding their data for ransom, threatening to burn the conglomerate's research edge by making the product public.

But why couldn't I any number play?

Wouldn't it be happier with something to sell back to Ono-Senda, happier than they'd be with one dead Johnny from Memory Lane?

Their program was on its way to an address in Sydney, to a place that held letters for clients and didn't ask questions once you'd paid a small retainer. Fourth-class surface mail. I'd erased most of the other copy and recorded our message in the resulting gap, leaving just enough of the program to identify it as the real thing.

My wrist hurt. I wanted to stop, to lie down to sleep. I knew that I'd lose my grip and fall soon, knew that the sharp black shoes I'd bought for my evening as Eddie Bax would lose their purchase and carry me down to Nighttown. But he rose in my mind like a cheap religious hologram, glowing, the enlarged chip on his Hawaiian shirt looming like a reconnaissance shot of some doomed urban nucleus.

So I followed Dog and Moll through Lo Tek heaven, jury-rigged and jerry-built from scraps that even Nighttown didn't want.

The Killing Floor was eight meters on a side. A giant had threaded steel cable back and forth through a junkyard and drawn it taut. It creaked when it moved, and it moved constantly, swaying and bucking as the gathering Lo Tek's arranged themselves on the shelf of plywood surrounding it. The wood was silver with age, polished with long use and deeply etched with initials, threats, declarations of passion. This was suspended from a separate set of cables which lost themselves in darkness beyond the raw white glare of the two ancient floods suspended above the Floor.

A girl with teeth like Dog's hit the Floor on all fours. Her breasts were tattooed with indigo spirals. Then she was across the Floor, laughing, grappling with a boy who was drinking dark liquid from a silver flask.

Lo Tek fashion ran to scars and tattoos. And teeth. The electricity they were tapping to light the Killing Floor seemed to be an exception to their overall esthetic: made in the name of, steel sport art? I didn't know, but I could see that the Floor was something special. It had the look of having been assembled over generations.

I held the useless shotgun under my jacket. Its hardness and heft were comforting, even though I had no more shells. And it came to me that I had no idea of what was happening, or of what was supposed to happen. And that was the nature of my game, because I'd spent most of my life as a blind receptacle to be filled with other

people's knowledge and then drained spouting synthetic languages I'd never understand. A very technical boy. But.

And then I noticed just how quiet the Lo Tek's had become.

He was there at the edge of the light, taking in the Killing Floor and the gallery of silent Lo Tek's with a tourist's calm. And as our eyes met for the first time with mutual recognition—a memory clicked into place for me, of Paris and the long Mercedes electric gliding through the rain to Notre Dame mobile greenhouse, Japanese faces behind the glass and a hundred Nikons ringing in blind phototropism, flowers of steel and crystal. Behind his eyes, as they found me, those same shutters whirring.

I looked for Moly Millions, but she was gone.

The Lo Tek's parted to let him step up onto the bench. He bowed, smiling, and stepped smoothly out of his sandals and down onto the Killing Floor. And then he came for me.

Moly hit the Floor, moving. The Floor screamed.

It was mixed and amplified, with pickups riding the four fat coil springs at the corners and contact mikes taped at random for rusting machine fragments. Somewhere the Lo Tek's had an amp and a synthesizer, and now I made out the shapes of speakers overhead, above the cruel white floods.

A drumbeat began, electronic, like an amplified heart, steady as a metronome.

She'd removed her leather jacket and boots, her T-shirt was sleeveless, faint tell-tales of Chiba City country traced along her thighs. Her leather jeans gleamed under the floods. She began to dance.

She flexed her knees, white feet tensed on a fastened gas tank, and the Killing Floor began to heave in response. The sound it made was like a world ending, like the wires that hold heaven snapping and coiling across the sky.

He rode with it, for a few heartbeats, and then he moved, judging the movement of the Floor perfectly, like a man stepping from one flat stone to another in an ornamental garden.

He pulled the top from his thumb with the grace of a man at ease with social gesture and flung it rather. Under the floods, the filament was a refracting thread of rainbow. She threw herself flat and rolled, jackknifing up as the molecule whipped past, steel claws snapping into the light in what must have been an automatic reflex of defense.

The drum pulse quickened, and she bounced with it, her dark hair wild around the blank silver lenses, her mouth thin, lips taut with concentration. The Killing Floor boomed and roared, and the Lo Tek's were screaming their excitement.

He retracted the filament to a whirling meter-wide circle of ghostly polychrome and spun it in front of him, thumbless hand held level with his sternum. A shield.

And Moly seemed to let something go, something inside, and that was the real start of her mad-dog dance. She jumped, twisting, lunging sideways, landing with both feet on an alloy engine block weld directly to one of the coil springs. I cupped my hands over my ears and knelt in a vertigo of sound. Thinking Floor and benches were on their way down, down to Nighttown, and I saw us tearing through the shambles, the wet wash, exploding on the fleshy rotten fruit. But the cable held, and the Killing Floor rose and fell like a crazy metal sea. And Moly danced on it.

And at the end, just before he made his final cleft with the filament, I saw something in his face, an expression that didn't seem to belong there. It wasn't fear and it wasn't anger. I think it was disbelief, stunned incomprehension mingled with pure aesthetic revulsion at what he was seeing, hearing—at what was happening to him. He retracted the whirling filament, the ghost disc shrinking to the size of a dinner plate as he whipped up his arm above his head and brought it down, the thumbtip curving out for Moly like a live thing.

The Floor carried her down, the molecule passing just above her head, the Floor whispering, lifting him into the path of the taut molecule. It should have passed harmlessly over his head and been withdrawn into its diamond-hard socket. If it took his hand just off just behind the wrist. There was a gap in the floor in front of him, and he went through it like a diver with a strange deliberate grace, a delicate kamikaze on his way down to Nighttown. Party. I think he took that dive to buy himself a few seconds of the dignity of silence. She'd killed him with culture shock.

The Lo Tek's roared, but someone shut the amplifier off, and Moly rode the Killing Floor into silence, hanging on now, her face white and blank, until the pitching slowed and there was only a faint ping of tortured metal and the grating of rust on rust.

We searched the Floor for the severed hand, but we never found it. All we found

was a graceful curve in one piece of rusted steel, where the molecule went through its edge was bright as new chrome.

We never learned whether the Yakuza had accepted our terms, or even whether they got our message. As far as I know, their program is still waiting for Eddie Bak on a shelf in the back room of a gift shop on the third level of Sydney Central-5. Probably they sold the original back to Ono-Senda months ago. But maybe they did get the pirate's broadcast, because nobody's come looking for me yet, and it's been nearly a year. If they do come, they'll have a long climb up through the dark, past Dog's earthen, and I don't look much like Eddie Bak these days. I let Moly take care of that, with a local anesthetic. And my new teeth have almost grown in.

I decided to stay up here. When I looked out across the Killing Floor, before he came, I saw how hollow I was. And I knew I was sick of being a bucket. So now I climb down and visit Jones almost every night.

We're partners now. Jones and I, and Moly Millions, too. Moly handles our business in the Dome. Jones is still in Furland but he has a bigger tank, with fresh seawater trucked in once a week. And he has his junk, when he needs it. He still talks to the kids with his frame of lights, but he talks to me on a new display unit in a shed that I rent there, a better unit than the one he used in the Navy.

And we're all making good money, better money than I made before, because Jones's Squid can read the traces of anything that anyone ever stored in me, and he gives it to me on the display unit in languages I can understand. So we're learning a lot about all my former clients. And one day I'll have a surgeon dig all the silicon out of my amygdalae, and I'll live with my own memories and nobody else's, the way other people do. But not for a while.

In the meantime it's really okay up here, way up in the dark, smoking a Chinese filtertip and listening to the condensation that drips from the geodesic dome. Real quiet up here—unless a pair of Lo Tek's decide to dance on the Killing Floor.

It's educational, too. With Jones to help me figure things out. I'm getting to be the most technical boy in town.

William Gibson is a full-time writer who resides in Vancouver, British Columbia. His fiction has appeared in two Doubleday anthologies: *Universes 71* and *Shadows 4*.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER ONE



PAUL
WUNDERLICH
ARTIST



BUILDING BRIDGES



The United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) struggle to bring the Superfund law's enforcement provisions to life has been a long, hard fight. The agency's efforts to bring the law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight. The agency's efforts to bring the law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight. The agency's efforts to bring the law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight.

inspired by an environmentalist, who had been a part of the Superfund law's design. The law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight. The agency's efforts to bring the law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight. The agency's efforts to bring the law's provisions to life have been a long, hard fight.

BY THOMAS WEIR







Turner's painting, 'Rain, Steam, and Great Central Railway Bridge', is a fine example of his work. It shows a steam locomotive crossing a bridge over a river. In the foreground, a figure stands on the bridge railing, looking towards the train. The painting is characterized by its soft, atmospheric quality, with visible brushstrokes and a focus on light and color. The composition is framed by a simple black border.

A
HARLAN
ELLISON
CELEBRATION

T

here are titles and then there are titles. For the exemplary, consider Robert Silverberg's "The Soul Painter and the Shapeshifter", Spider Robinson's "Rubber Soul," a story concerning the resurrection of John Lennon, Patrice Duviol's "The Eyes on Butterflies' Wings", Tom Sullivan's "The Mickey Mouse Olympics", Alfred Bester's "Galatea Galante"—one each from the preceding five volumes in this series. Now, as befits the author celebrated here, Number Six is emblazoned with "Chained to the Fast Lane in the Red Queen's Race." It's a never-before-published story—published, in fact, almost as quickly as Harlan Ellison completed it. And it does his fine reputation justice—its title and content both.

Ever a powerful and compelling writer, Ellison, in "When Auld's Acquaintance Is Forgot" (reprinted from *Omnibus*) grips us in a compulsion involving the persistence of memory and the possibilities of repentance in a future society. Chilling.

Richly worded, tightly controlled, tensely paced—these are the characteristics that partially make up the Ellison style. There is another part that is magical, it's the part that sets off every great storyteller, and it is amply represented in "On the Slab" (also reprinted from *Omnibus*).

It is appropriate that titlemaker-storyteller Harlan Ellison join Orson Scott Card and Robert Silverberg in *The Best of Omnibus Science Fiction's Celebrated Circle*.



*It was the best of all the
countless lives he'd lived, and
Walter wanted to stay*

CHAINED TO THE FAST LANE IN THE RED QUEEN'S RACE

BY HARLAN ELLISON

Over cappuccino and key lime pie, he told her that even though it wouldn't seem as if he was going away, he was, in fact, going away. Farther than she could imagine.

"I'll go with you. Take me with you. She started to cry. Nothing's holding me here. I can go with you."

She told her that though he could not take her, that he could take nothing and no one with him, she needn't worry about his being gone, because he would be here. With her.

She thought he was speaking in metaphor, making that occasional spirituality in his na-

ture that was a large part of his attraction. "I don't want the memory of you. . . . I want you," she said urgently.

"I'll be me. I'll be here, except that it won't be this me. It'll be the next one over."

She got hysterical at that and he quickly came around the breakfast table that she had polished so assiduously with lemon oil in joyous expectation of having dinner with him, and he held her tightly. His unhappiness made somehow supportable by the mingled odors of her recently washed hair and the lemon oil. "I love you," she sobbed. He told her he

knew that, and he said he loved her, too, and he told her not to cry, because it was going to be all right. All of which was true. Then he told her that she might not even realize it wasn't him but some other him, which was also true. But it made her more hysterical.

Then he said the truest thing about their relationship. He said, "We didn't really fall in love. What we did was collide at the intersection of your life and mine."

She had no idea what that really meant, but she took it to mean he had fallen out of love with her, and he was abandon-

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PAINTING BY RENE MAGRITTE

ng her, and she ran away from him, locked herself in the bathroom, and he left, not waiting to cause her any more anguish. Because, in truth, he had loved her more than any woman he had ever known in his life. In this life.

But he had only resided in this life for eleven months.

He left her then, gathering up his jacket and muffler, and the little Steuben glass panda he had found gift-wrapped on his place at the dinner table. The chances of carrying the figurine through were not good, but he wanted to try.

Wanted to try not only because it would have been cruelly for her to come out of the bathroom, find him gone, and see the Invincible, dear gift left behind. Wanted to try because he felt he should try to remember her.

Forgetting her, as he had forgotten so many others from so many lives past, was inevitable. But like a child who saves a special seashell, a memorable rock, a useless lanyard from summer camp, in order that the memories will not fade too quickly, he always tried to carry some memento through.

He was alone in the creaking, ancient elevator when he felt himself going. Like the onset of the flu. He had felt it coming as they had sat eating dinner. The dryness in the nasal passages, the unpleasant feeling at the back of his throat that he had never been able to describe, save by comparing it to the gasping discomfort that accompanies the too-rapid consumption of too much ice cream, the burning in the eyes, the aching pains in hip and finger joints.

He was relieved that he had felt the onset of the slippage and had gotten away before he vanished. Otherwise, how could she have recognized the appearance of the other him when he was gone?

He leaned against the wall of the elevator, hoping no one had pressed the button on a lower floor, hoping he would go quietly before the elevator reached the lobby, and he drew in long, deep, shuddering breaths.

And in a moment he had slipped through.

The elevator was empty. A faint smile-lance in the air, and a not unpleasant odor, the smell of sunshine on dusky Concord grapes bursting on their vines.

He was gone from that life. His name had been Alan Justus. And he was gone.

At precisely the instant that Alan Justus scintillated out of existence in an elevator traveling between the fifteenth and fourteenth floors of an apartment building on East 63rd Street in New York City, a man

who looked exactly like Alan Justus emerged from the doorway of Senway & Sons, the famous piano makers on East 57th Street, who had closed for the evening three hours earlier, and he hurried toward Fifth Avenue on his way to 63rd Street. He was dressed quite differently from Alan Justus, which would cause momentary confusion when, eighteen minutes hence, he would ring the doorbell of that certain apartment on the twentieth floor of the building on East 63rd. A moment of pain and confusion that would be compounded when the door was opened and he would say to the attractive brunet whose eyes were swollen from crying, "Hi, Katherine? I'm Allen." Because he would say it and not spell it, she would not realize till weeks later that he was no longer A-I-I-a-n, but someone named A-L-I-e-n. There were other, minor differences, as well: a mole on the left shoulder no longer existed, the lyrics to a number of popular songs were absent from his available repertoire for singing in the shower. He now liked Brussels sprouts, the buffalo-head nickel he carried as a lucky piece would soon be spent with the rest of the change in his pocket, because for Allen it had no special significance.

But later that night, in bed, Katherine would perceive a subtle, salutary difference between the man who had walked out of her apartment and the man who had returned less than half an hour later.

It is an ill wind that blows no one some good.

Alan breathed deeply as he passed through the membrane. It might not have been a membrane. But it felt very much like pressing one's face against a balloon, pushing steadily and without discomfort into a resistant surface. And in a timeless moment he was through. His right hand, which had been in his jacket pocket, holding the glass panda, was now empty. Goodbye, Kathy, he thought, and put her out of his mind as the memory faded, faded.

"You can't sleep here, buddy," said a voice. Moved along.

He looked up. By moonlight he saw the not-unkind face of a cop, staring down at him. There were broken veins in his round cheeks and on the fleshy bulb of his nose. He drinks, Alan thought. But then, if I had to spend my nights waiting for teenage creeps to rob convenience markets, I'd drink, too.

"I'm not sleeping, Officer," Alan said, getting to his feet. "I'm sitting, thinking, con-

templating the moon and the steady passage of the hours." He was eloquent in this new life, he liked that.

It was a doorway in which he stood. Now he stepped out onto the sidewalk. A section of residential buildings, well-tended town houses, neat entranceways. Traffic was light. The first car he noticed had no wheels. It shuddered past on what appeared to be an air-cushion mechanism. There was no unpleasant exhaust smell.

The cop examined him, snapping back to give him room in case a gun or knife might materialize in a hand. The cop's manner altered instantly as he perceived the cut of suit was expensive, the shoes so highly polished they reflected both streetlight and moonlight, the face shaved, the hair combed. The faint scent of lime aftershave. "Sorry to stare, you like that, sir? Thought you might be an old stud, catching forty winks."

"No harm done, Officer," Alan said. "The cement was cool and I was stalling the return home."

Why, it's Mr. Justman, isn't it? Alan's face was full in the light now. He smiled at the cop. They stood staring at each other for another second, then the cop said, "Well, say hello to your mother for me, Mr. Justman." And he touched the shiny black wrist of his cop with his stubby left hand in a gesture as old as the deference paid by city employees to those known as gentry. And he walked away, leaving Alan Justman to contemplate the necessity of going home.

He stood in the channel of street and the sound of a spiky, screamhorn saxophone cut through the empty moment. He looked up at the few bright windows but could not find the source of the music. I have to go home, he thought. And the thought reinterpereted itself visually in his mind as a dark, ominous rush of water slithering into the distance. Smooth, slick, oily shapes, barely breaking the surface of the heath, frightening shapes cruising along, were caught in the moonlight of his mind. I have to go home. Mother will be worried.

He let himself into the darkened town-house. The beaded lamp on the foyer credenza threw an asthmatic glow halfway up the stairs. Mother's elevator-chair was at the top of the balustrade. So she was in bed already. The day nurse would have put her down, tucked her in, and left her to the company of the bizarre cologne. He stood with one hand on the newel post, a foot on the

lowest step, and he listened. From above, silent he could hear the sound of delicious laughter and that same upsy-daisy music. Joh-ann insisted on playing all night.

He started to turn away.
"Aren't you coming up, Alvin?" He looked up at the voice of the woman caught him in a moose of command.

She stood there half-shrouded in darkness, but not even the shadows pooled at the head of the stairs could hide the luminous expanse of thigh and leg her pearly dressing gown revealed. She touched the corner of her mouth with a fingertip. Black lacquered fingernail against her lower lip.

He climbed the stairs slowly. Breathing steadily, she waited for him. And when he was one step below the landing she reached out and put her hand behind his neck, drawing his face toward her. She looked down into his eyes and smiled a feral smile of possession. "Your mother is weeping. Everyone's been weeping."

Then she led him up and into the master bedroom where the lights were low and the pale throng moved on a silent tide around the yellowed figure of his mother propped up on her pillows in the great canopied bed.

It was not as bed a night as it might have been. The blind child was not there. Nor the woman without arms.

He was a Chinese puzzle box, a box within a box within a box.

A Russian capsule doll which, when the halves were broken open, revealed a smaller doll nesting inside, a smaller doll which, when opened, exposed an even smaller doll, down and down and down to the most minuscule doll secreted at the core of the largest, so tiny its features were indistinguishable.

Like Gurdjiff and Giordano Bruno and Tesla before him, like Gagliostro and David Hume, like Coriolanus and Ptolemy John and Uvay the historian and like Brahmagupta, Muhammad, Cassiodorus, and even the poet Sylvia Plath, he had discovered—in a blinding epiphany on no special day one day—that there was no such thing as luck. Nor such a thing as serendipity, no such thing as synchronism. No single life of random chance existed. No single life was led by any breathing mortal.

He learned, there was only slipping across from one life to the next. One life that gave into the next, slightly different, and beyond that the doorway to the next life, and the next.

He learned that humans were immortal.

Life was not of a finite length, not of a prescribed duration. Life was serial. Each spark of life—not reincarnated as incorrectly perceived in an analogue of the reality—traveled through consecutive existences in contiguous universes, replenished and reformed as a new individual. But each altered from the life just behind, altered still more when it became the next one ahead.

He came to think of the totality of existence as baklava, the Armenian pastry made up of thousands of thin glass-thin layers, one atop the others, so tightly pressed one could not differentiate among them, could not know when one had bitten through to the next.

There was no luck, merely slipping through the membrane into the next universal layer, assuming a new variation of self. And sometimes it was a better variation, and that was a day in which everything went right. And sometimes it was a worse variation, and that was a day in which random troubles compounded till life was not worth living.

Really was a shunting station, an invisible railroad terminal without end, and through that switching station every soul that had ever existed came and went moving on to its next manifestation of self, all unaware as memory of the transfer was obliterated by passage, all unaware that today's self was a vaguely familiar but completely different entity than yesterday's self.

But like Da Vinci and Karl Marx and William James before him, something had gone wrong and he had not lost the memory of where and who he had been. Imperfectly shadowy in retrospect, neither amnesia nor forgetfulness, came the realization that like cats nudging each other over from food bowl to food bowl, he was being pushed from life to life by the firm behind him. And in turn, he was pushing the firm next in line. He could not, he understood, coexist in the same universe with another of himself.

It was a journey without end. How many hundreds, thousands, millions of lives he had led since he had been born, he could not begin to surmise.

And how he longed to find the perfect life. To stop the flow. To halt and feel no pressure to move along. The cop that was the life-flow would not tap him on the sole of his shoe and order him to get up, move it along, buddy. To reach a life that was pleasing, rewarding, supportable. And to stop.

But every firm behind him was also seek-

ing the good life, and they kept the pressure constant.

Who would want to be stuck in a life such as the one he now shared with his mother and her society of twisted degenerates? Alvin Justman longed for checkout time.

"Where were you last night?" His mother asked. Her voice was thin and filled with calamity. How much longer could she live in her condition? The day nurse and the scared hunchback who told her fortune ministered to the old woman. They bustled around the bed, huffing, inoculating, moaning, touching the sores. He stared at the tableau and said, "Mother, why don't you let me kill you so you can pass on to the next big world?"

Her lips trembled before she spoke. "What are you talking about?" I asked you. The least you can do is stay by me till the end.

"There is no end in sight, Mother."
"Thank God for the wonders of medical science. A tube clamped to her throat made bubbling sounds."

"Yes, Thank God, Alvin said."
"And so," she said, "where were you last night?" The seance had to be put off. We needed that occasional spirituality in your nature that is my son, a large part of your attractiveness.

"I was out walking, my mother. Communing with the cosmos and the cop on the beat."

She stared at him through milky moles. "Sometimes I wonder if you are, indeed, my child."

"Sometimes you're not alone in wondering," he replied. Then cheerily he asked again, "So there's no maltripe in the cards today, is that right?"

The day nurse turned to him. "She's asleep again."

Thank God for the wonders of medical science, he murmured and left the bedroom. Somewhere behind him a man named Allen was enjoying a better life than the one he had left, learning with just cause the life that lay ahead. I've got to get the hell out of here, Alvin Justman thought.

But all he could do was apply pressure. And if it was a better life ahead, there would be a firm who would resist that pressure, as Alan Justus had resisted until Alan grew strong enough to effect the transition.

And so, for the next nine years, Alvin lived in that dark townhouse with the ever-changing clique of human refuse and with his dear mother, thankful for the wonders of

On a Sunday night, stoking the ancient furnace in the basement, still wincing from the pain of the straight razor wounds into which they had poured the hot wax, he felt himself trembling with self-loathing and hysteria, and the onset of slippage. He began to cry with relief. Thank God, he thought.

And in a moment he was pressing against the membrane, feeling compassion for whichever him was at that moment emerging into the world of mother and her minions.

And in another moment he was through into his next life, where he was Elvin Luckman, a young man whose mother had just died and who desolate with the loss had signed up for the merchant marine. Two years later, understanding at last that the extended series of heartbreakingly empty seasons he had had with women who despised and ridiculed him was an attempt to pay penance for his mother's death, he also came to understand that this life was destined to be a tragic one. His mother's death, an inevitability for which he bore no accountability after they had opened her and discovered the carcinoma had metastasized like ergot in a field of rye, had become the central issue of his existence.

He became celibate, withdrawn, obscure to the point of laying out his clothes and standing his watch aboard ship in harmony with the lines of tellurian force he had found described in a worthless book of crackpot mysticism in a sidestreets bookshop in Hong Kong.

His sanity slipped from him, day by day, and without the companionship of friends he had no sticking-post to which his floating mind could adhere. Strange phantasms and arcane beliefs assailed him. Standing watch, as the sea billowed around him, he held conversations with himself. And only occasionally was he rational enough to remember that there was a life beyond this one.

Finally, what saved him was the waking terror of the life in which he had been Alvin Justman. The pressure behind him.

The life with mother and her band of freaks.

The life he, Elvin, had totally forgotten. But there had been another him who had emerged into that monstrous venue, and like Alvin before him, Allen wanted out! The pressure was significant.

And during shore leave in London, Elvin

Luckman felt the breath-catching unpleasantness of having eaten too much ice cream too quickly. He lay down in the bottom of the punt on the Serpentine, and in a moment was gone from that place.

Overtime for use of the punt went unpaid and the quayside entrepreneur who rented the little boats not only had to absorb the loss, but was required to pay three pounds six to the son of the man who located the punt.

It is an ill wind.

Into a life as William Luckin. A life working in a vacuum-tube circuit-coding factory in Liverpool. Life without color. Life without change. Life that was no life. Three years.

Into a life as Wilhelm Richter. Life of dejection for everyone around him. He knew how intelligent he was. He knew it was bad breaks, the efforts of those around him who were crazed with jealousy at his gifts, that and that alone keeping him from ascendancy. He despised having to smile at them, loathed having to kowtow to them, hated them for their enjoyment of his subservient position. He knew his was having an affair with one of her old paramours, knew that too, but not which one. Nine months, fifteen days.

Into a life as Waldemar van Rensburg who lived within sight of The Hague and had a perfectly pleasant, if uneventful, life. Wife, Tonia, three children: Hans, Karel, Wilhelmina (after the Queen, rest her soul), small tobacco shop, three weeks in Belgium every year. Only a year—Wilhelm was mad with his life and pushed hard from behind—and he was nudged into the next layer of baklava.

The slippage did not go smoothly.

It was as if he were being born again. Pushing, pressing, thrusting against the membrane. It would not give. As if this onerous way was of a stronger, less resilient substance.

As if someone on the other side were pushing back in the opposite direction, as if the life-flow were trying to run upstream, as if he were going against the grain. He had time to register the anomaly while in the transitional state.

But the pressure from behind him, the pressure of lives as Alan, Allen, Alvin, Elvin, William, Wilhelm—terrible lives—could not be contained. He went through.

In the first moments of his new life, as usual, he was able to remember the totality

of his journey. Not each life individually, but a vast panorama of personae, with a few that stood out in sharper relief than the mass. The flamenco dancer he had been, the sandhog digging the Holland Tunnel, the feudal seif, the confidant of the Medici, the gravedigger in Denmark, the calamarian-riding Melanesian.

In that moment he thought of himself, each time it happened he thought of himself, as Alice had perceived herself, running as fast as he could run, to stay in the same place, in the Red Queen's race.

Then the moment passed, and he opened his eyes, and his face stared closely back at him. He was sitting in an easy chair in a pleasant drawing room filled with books, a fireplace, and the scent of candlewax, and he was not looking in a mirror.

"Waldemar?" the face that was his said.

"Ja, Waldemar," he replied. "And you are—?"

"Wallace. Vanowen. And I'm not going.

The memory started to slip away.

"What? what do you—? And Wally Vanowen slapped him across the face as hard as he could. He didn't pull the blow simply let fly. Waldemar's head snapped around and in that instant his mind cleared.

"Hold onto it, boy!" said Wally angrily, urgently. "Don't let it slip away or who the hell knows what I'll have to do with you, because I ain't going, cookie."

"You remember?"

"Yeah. I remember. I remember Alvin and his creepy old lady. I remember that paranoiac Wilhelm, remember all the way back to bootsidening with Blackback Pershing. You remember that one, the gangrene and the dysentery?"

"My God, I do, yes! All the way back then."

"That's nothing to what I remember, son. And it's what makes for a good life. Which is what this is, in case you hadn't figured it out yet. This is the one. The top of the line. The prize in the Cracker Jack box. This is the best possible life that can be led by this series of guys who've been me. And here I stay, I don't budge."

But you have to.

Wally chuckled. It hit pipe.

Then he went and sat down in an easy chair across from Waldemar's. They stared at each other for a long time.

"They're pushing me from behind," Waldemar said. "I'd be happy to let you have this life, but I have no control over the process. I'm nudged, you're nudged."

Wally shook his head. "I don't go."

"They'll make you go! The pressure!"

Wally exhaled a cloud of smoke. The drawing room smelled woody and comfortably close. In fact, now that Waldemar thought about it, the room—and himself in it—felt more comfortable than anything he could remember. He felt as if he belonged here. He knew, in that moment, that his predecessor in this life, the Wally Vanowen sitting across from him, had told him the absolute truth: this was the best of all possible worlds.

This was the terminus he had sought for uncountable lifetimes.

Here the Flying Dutchman came to rest.

Here the Red Queen's race marked its finish line.

And somehow, somehow, he would stay here!

His mind scrambled through possibilities, cleaving at one plan, then another, casting them aside like a dog digging through a wastebasket for that bit of refuse producing the wondrous aroma. Somewhere in his past, somewhere in all those lives he had led, was the method, the bit of data, the spark of cunning that would permit him to shove Wally through before him, back into the life flow, back into the race.

Then he would worry about keeping all the others behind him locked out. Jubilation sang along the wires of his soul.

"What makes this such a perfect life?" He had to stall till he could reason this out.

Wally smiled. "The knowledge, cookie."

"What knowledge?"

"The knowledge that I'm not a slave. The smarts to know that I can live the life I choose if I don't let the life I'm in live me. I'm happy in my skin."

Waldemar could not comprehend what Wally was saying. It sounded like errant nonsense, obscurant philosophy of the most sophomoric sort, the kind of twaddle he'd heard from trendy hall-wits floating on drugs and cheap-pack religiosity. He had led too many lives to go for such simplistic generalizations.

But he felt comfortable here. Felt as if he belonged for the first time in numberless years of lives.

But he listened as Wally told him of this life. And there was nothing at all remarkable about it.

"I get up each morning and make a cup of coffee with cardamom and chocolate in it. I sit and look out at the edge of his bed behind this house, and I watch the seasons change. I dress every day in clothes that I like, that are comfortable, with a pair of old

boots that know my feet. I do my work. I translate poetry by Latin American writers for the university press. I spend many hours a day in their words, surrounded by their beauty. My friends call and suggest we go for barbecue dinners, and we laugh and make up bad puns. My wife is the part of me I need but don't have the history or space within myself to contain. I have two children, who search through my coat pockets for little gifts when I come home from a trip. I read a book that made me cry this week."

Waldemar felt a subtle shift in his body as if the blood had sped up in veins and arteries, as if he had gotten late growth in his bones, as if his heart had been touched. Then it passed, and he felt contempt for Wally. To reside in paradise and die so tragically! The water was deeper, but this fool had no sense of the vastness. He resolved to snatch this Eden from its totally unworthy tenant. And for the first time he contemplated suicide.

Well, wasn't it suicide if he killed Wally? How could it be murder if he killed himself? Two of them could not exist in the same life, he knew that. So Wally had to go.

Seemingly still to be listening to the dreary penitence, he looked around the drawing room. He would have to move fast, without hesitation, brutally. He would have only one chance. He knew that. They were in the middle of the drawing room. The walls of bookcases were filled with volumes and the three doors were closed. A sofa, a small sideboard, the two easy chairs, a floor lamp, the fireplace.

There was a stand of fireplace implements, long ash shovel, heavy poker. Yes. He pushed himself out of the easy chair.

He was still a bit unsteady. Wally stopped speaking, watching him. "I have to get my sealings," he said, acting wobblier than he felt. Strength was coming into his body now. He put out a hand toward the fireplace mantel, as if reaching for support. Wally started to say something. He stumbled, took two faltering steps toward the fireplace, and in a rush grabbed the handle of the poker. He spun with the weapon raised over his head, one sharp blow, one powerful smash, an instant, just an instant, and he would be alone here.

Three doors opened into the drawing room. Three men stood in the openings, and behind them were others. But the poker was on its descent already. Wally's eyes widened.

And Waldemar felt himself hurled into the membrane.

Men in merry doorways faded and were receding shadows.

He was sick with having eaten too much ice cream too quickly. His hip joints ached. He was on his way toward another life.

He was Walter Vernon and he was a failure. Every time he had attempted to emigrate, the mediocrity in which he existed, disaster slipped from the shadows to crush his spirit. He was simply not good enough. And Belinda never missed an opportunity to tell him of his inadequacies. The children were impossible, needing a strong hand and not having a father who could provide it. Trouble. There was always trouble. Each day was a campaign in a war that was lost before it had begun.

Walter Vernon, though he could not remember the fact, was running as fast as he could in a life of desolation that stretched on before him for fifteen years. At the end of that life lay a membrane that gave onto a last lane of lives, each more awful than the ones before. Oh, perhaps some were better, and perhaps somewhere ages away there was another existence in which one could read a book that brought tears.

But, maintaining the pattern, Walter Vernon might not recognize it.

In a drawing room filled with books, a large group of men who bore a striking similarity to each other stood talking quietly. There was a sense of great loss among them.

"He was too damaged. Too bent by what he'd been through, the poor son-of-a-bitch," Wally Vanowen said. They nodded and sighed.

"You'd think he would have realized said Merle Webber. We all believed no two of us could exist in the same life when we got here. But couldn't he see he was existing with you, Wally, right here, right in this room? Couldn't he see that if could work?"

Wallace Vanowen spread his hands in hopeless resignation. "Sometimes it's been too awful for them. We do the best we can."

They talked about it for a while longer, then decided they and their wives and their lovers and their children would spend the rest of the day having a barbecue and relaxing before they returned to their separate lives here in this world that was rapidly filling up with themselves. Here in this best of all possible worlds where those who were worthy of happiness had found it.

It was the best of all possible worlds because they had made it so, a world in which checkout time never came.

WHEN AULD'S ACQUAINTANCE IS FORGOT

*For some people, the horrors of the
past are not easily laid to rest*

BY HARLAN ELLISON

That's a federal offense you're suggesting, Mr. Auld. It's not just my job; it's the whole franchise. The auditors come in, they fall over it—because I don't know how to cover it—and the people who own this Bank lose everything they sank into it. The young women stared at Jerry Auld till he looked away. She wasn't trying to be kind, despite the look of desperation on his face. She was telling him in as flat and forthright a manner as she could summon—just in case he was a field investigator for the regulatory agency looking for bootleg Banks—possibly wired for gathering evidence—so he would understand that this Memory Bank was run strictly along the lines of the federal directives.

Is that what you want, Mr. Auld? To get us in the most serious kind of trouble?

He was pale and thin, holding his clasped hands in his lap, rubbing one thumb over the other till the skin was raw. His eyes had desperation burning in them. "No... no, of course not. I just thought."

She waited.

"I just thought there might be some way you could make an exception in this case. I really have to get rid of this one last, pretty awful memory. I know you've gone as far as you can by the usual standards, but I felt if you just looked in the regulations—maybe you'd find some legitimate way to."

"Let me stop you," she said. "I've monitored your myelin sheathing, and the depletion level is absolutely at maximum. There is no way on earth short of a lea-



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evil guideline being relaxed, that we can teach some more memory out of your brain. She let a mischievous—some might say nasty—smile cross her lips. Simply put, Mr. Auld, you are overdrawn at the Memory Bank.

He straightened in the form fit and his voice went cold. Lady, I'm about as miserable as a human being can be. I've got a head full of stuff that makes sex with spiders and other small, furry things seem like a happy alternative, and I don't need you to make me feel like a fool.

He stood up. I'm sorry I asked you to do something you can't do. I just hope you don't come to where I am someday and need someone to help.

She started to reply, but he was already walking toward the exit. As it clicked, he turned to look at her once more. "You don't look anything like her. I was wrong."

Then he was gone. It took her some time to unravel the meaning of his little friends, but she decided she had no time to feel sorry for him. She wondered who "her" was, then she forgot it.

The little man with the long nose and the gentle carter spotted Auld as he left the Memory Bank. He had been sitting on a bench in the mall, sipping at a bulb of Flashpoint Soda, watching the Bank. He recognized Auld's distressed look at once, and he punctiliously deposited the bulb in a nearby incinerator box and followed him.

When Jerry Auld wandered into a showroom displaying this year's models of the Ford hoverpak, the little man sauntered around the block once, strolled into the showroom, and walked up to him. They stood side by side, looking at the pak.

"They say it's the same design the air-cops use, just less juicy," the little man said, not looking at Auld.

Jerry looked down at him, aware of him for the first time. That *so*? Interesting.

"You look to me," the little man said in the same tone of voice he had used to comment on the Ford pak, casual, light, "like a man with some bad memories."

Jerry's eyes narrowed. "Something I can do for you, chum?"

The little man shrugged and acted nonchalant. "Forme? Hell, no. I'm fuzzy-free and feely, friend. What I thought I might be able to do something upright for you."

"Like what?"

"Like get you to a clean, precise Bank that could teach off some bad stains."

Jerry looked around. The showroom's gifters were busy with live customers. He

turned to face the little man.

"Why me?"

The little man smiled. "Sew you hobble out of the Franchise Bank in the mall. You looked lucky. I heard. Mighty rocky. Carrying a frightened old old movie in your skull. Figured they turned you down for one reason or another. Figured you could use a friendly steer."

Jerry had been expecting something like this. The Bank in the mall had not been his first stop. There had been the Memory Bank in the Corporate Tower and the Bank in the Longacre Shopping Center and the Bank at Mount Sinai. They had all turned him down, and from recent articles he'd read on bootleg memory operations, he'd suspected that maintaining a viable image would put the steers on to him.

"You got a name, chum?"

"Do I gotta have a name?"

"Just in case I go around a dark corner with you and get a rap upside my head. I want to be able to remember a tag to go with the face."

The little man grinned nastily. "Remember the nose. My friends call me Pinocchio."

"Let's go see the man," Jerry Auld said.

"Women," Pinocchio said.

"Women," Jerry Auld said. "Let's go see the woman."

The bootleg Bank was on an air cushion yacht anchored beyond the twelve-mile limit. They reached it using hoverpaks and by the time the strung lights of the vessel materialized out of the mist, it was night. They put down on the forecastle pad and racked their units. Pinocchio kept up a line of useless chatter, intended to allay Auld's fears. It served to draw him up tighter than he'd been before the little man had brooded him.

Jerry saw guards with weapons on the flying bridge.

Pinocchio caught his glance and said,

"Precautions."

"Sure."

Pinocchio didn't move. Jerry said, "Are we doing something here or just taking the night air?" He didn't like being under the guns.

Pinocchio kept his eyes on the flying bridge as he said, "They're making us report. It'll only be a minute."

"What kind of trouble do these people get?" Jerry asked.

Hackers sometimes. You know, private. The market's lively right now. A lot of jockeying for territory, getting good product to push. One of the armed guards mo-

tioned with his weapon, and Pinocchio said, "Come on."

They went belowdecks. The yacht was handsomely appointed. Flocked-velvet wallpaper in the companionways, burnished metal banisters, thick carpets. Pinocchio knocked at an infold, teak door. The door was opened by an unexceptional-looking woman. She smiled, pro forma, and walked back into the cabin, permitting Auld and the little man to enter.

The room was a spacious saloon, fitted to the walls with the memory-teaching devices Auld recognized from his many trips to legitimate Banks in the city.

"Mr. Keogh, I'd like to introduce Mr. Jerry Auld. Met him in the city, thought we could do a little business."

She waved him to silence. "Do you have your own transportation, Mr. Auld? Or did you come with Mr. Timacchi?"

Auld said, "I have my own pak."

"Then you can go, Mr. Timacchi," she said to the little man. "Stop by the office and get a check."

Obscurely, Pinocchio bobbed his head and smiled a good-bye at Jerry. Then, sans forelock-lugging, he bowed himself out of the saloon. Ms. Keogh waved at a formid Jerry sat down.

"How close are you to maximum depletion?" she said.

He decided not to fence. He was in too much pain. They were both here for the same thing. I'm at the limit.

She walked around the saloon, thinking. Then she came and sat down beside him in the other formid. Through the open porthole Auld heard the mournful sound of something calling for a male across the night water. "Let me tell you several things," she said.

"I want to get rid of some bad stains," Auld said. "I know what I need to know."

She raised a hand to silence him. "Probably. Nonetheless, this is not a bucket shop. Bootlegging is, but not a crash-and-burn operation."

He indicated he'd listen.

"The holographic memory model postulates that a memory is stored in a manner analogous to a hologram—not sited in any specific area, but stored all over the brain. To remove one certain memory, it is always necessary to break molecules of myelin all over the brain, from the densely packed myelin of the corpus callosum—"

"The white matter," Auld said. She nodded. "I've heard all this before."

"—from the white matter right down the

spinal cord, perhaps even down into the peripheral nerves." She finished on a tone of dogged determination.

"Now tell me about the weak point in the long-chain myelin molecule. The A-I link. Tell me how easily the molecule breaks there. The point at which muscular dystrophy and other neurodegenerative diseases attack the molecule. Tell me how I might become a head of lettuce if I go past the max. I've heard it all before. I'm surprised you're trying to discourage me. I'm also annoyed, lady."

She looked at him with resignation. "We don't push anyone, and we don't lie. It's bad enough we're outside the law. I don't want anyone's life on my hands. Your choice. Fully informed."

He stood up. "Put me in the drain and let's get this over with." "It must be nasty."

"I pity the poor son-of-a-bitch you sell these stims to."

"Would you like to meet the head that will be receiving what you'll be losing?"

"Not much."

"He's a very old man whose life has been bland beyond the telling. He wants action, danger, adventure, romance. He wants to settle into his twilight years with a head filled with wonder and experience."

"I'm touched." He made haste. "Good-morning, lady. Get this shit out of my head!"

She waved him to the teaching unit on the wall. He followed her as she opened out the wings. She folded down the formfit with its probe helmet, and he sat without waiting for instructions. He had been in that seat before. Perhaps too many times.

"This won't hurt, Mr. Keogh said."

"That's not true," he replied.

"You're right. It's not true," she said, and the helmet dropped and the probes fastened to his skull and she turned on the power. The universe became a whirlpool.

Lucy spat blood, and he touched her chin with the moist cloth. "Jerry, please."

"No. Forget it."

"I'm in terrible pain, Jerry."

"I'll call the medic."

"You know it won't do any good. You know what you have to do."

He turned away. "I can't, kid. I just can't."

"I trust you, Jerry. If you do it, I won't be afraid. I know it'll be okay."

It wasn't going to be okay, no matter how it happened. For a moment he halted her for wanting to share it with him, for needing this last temble measure of love no one should

be asked to give.

"Don't let them put me in the ground, Jerry. Nobody can talk to worms. Send me to the fee. I wouldn't mind that, not if you were with me."

She was rambling. He understood about her fear of the dark, down there forever in the cold, with things moving toward her. Yes, he could guarantee the clean fire would have what remained after. But she was rambling, talking about things she was seeing on the other side—

"I know they're over there, past the cross-over, Jerry. They were there before, when I thought I was going. Don't let me die alone. Be there to keep them at bay till I can run home. Please."

She coughed blood again, and her eyes closed. He held the moist cloth and reached down and lifted her head from the pillow and placed it over her face. "I love you, kiddo."

After a very long time he took the pillow away. It was heavily stained.

Ms. Keogh called two deckhands to help him onto the forecabin. They stripped his park on him. The mat was heavier now, had slipped into fog. If there were stars somewhere beyond the yacht, they could not be seen.

"Can you travel?" she said. He was looking off to starboard. She took his head in her hands. "Can you travel?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm fine." He looked away again.

Set the auto for the city, she said to one of the deckhands. She spoke softly. "Do you remember Lucy?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the fire?"

"What fire?"

"Lucy."

"Yes. She smiled at me."

They sent him aloft and he hovered for a moment. Then the autopilot cut in and he moved slowly off into the fog.

She watched for a time, but there were no stars visible.

Then she went belowdecks to purify the stam that had been stored in the unit.

Later that night an old man sat in the unit's formfit, and the balance of pain in the universe was restored.

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*Lightning strikes
a tomb, uncovering an ancient
and awesome secret*

ON THE SLAB

BY HARLAN ELLISON

Lightning was drawn to the spot. Season after season, August to November but most heavily in September, the jagged killing bolts sought out George Gibree's orchard. Gibree, a farmer with four acres of scabrous apple trees whose steadily diminishing production of fruit would drive him, one year later, to cut his throat with a rabbit-skinning knife and to bleed to death in the loft of his barn in Chapachet, near Providence, Rhode Island. That George Gibree found the dismal creature at the northeast corner of his property late in September, in the season of killing bolts. The obscenely cupped trees — soamed black as if by fireblight — had withstood one attack after another, splintering a little more each year, withering a little more each year, dying a little more each year. The Macintoshes they produced — hideous and wrinkled as Thandomide babies — night after night.

PAINTING BY ERNST FUCHS



the lightning, drawn to the spot, cracked and thrashed—until one night, as though weary of the cosmic game, a monstrous forked bolt—sizzling with power, uncovered the creature's graveplace.

When he went out to inspect the orchard the next morning, holding back the tears till he was well out of sight of Emma and the house, George Gibeze looked down into the crater and saw it stretched out on its back, its single green eye with the two pupils glowing ferociously in the morning sunlight: its left forearm—bent up at the elbow—seeming to clutch with spread fingers at the morning air. It was as if the thing had been struck by the sky's fury as it was trying to dig itself out.

For just a moment as he stared down into the pit, George Gibeze felt as if the gangle mooring his brain were being ripped loose. His head began to tremble on his neck—and he wrenched his gaze from the impossible man, snatched out, tilting the thirty-foot-long pit.

In the orchard there could be heard the sounds of insects, a few birds, and the whimpering of George Gibeze.

Children trespassing to play in the orchard saw it, and the word spread through town, and by stringer to a freelance writer who did occasional human-interest pieces for the Providence Journal. She drove out to the Gibeze farm and, finding it impossible to speak to George Gibeze, who sat in a straight-back chair staring out the window without speaking or even acknowledging her presence, managed to coyle Emma Gibeze into letting her wander out to the orchard alone.

The item was small when published, but it was the beginning of October and the word was quiet. The item received attention.

By the time a team of graduate students in anthropology arrived with their professor pieces of the enormous being had been torn away by beasts of the field and by curious visitors. They sent one of their group back to the University of Rhode Island, in Kingston, advising him to contact the University's legal representatives, readying them for the eventual purchase of this terrifying, miraculous discovery. Clearly, it was not a hoax, this was no P.T. Barnum "Cardiff Giant," but a creature never before seen on the earth.

And when night fell, the professor was forced to badger the most amenable of the students into staying with the thing: Coleman lanterns, down jackets, and a mini-

stove were brought in. But by morning all three of the students had fled.

Three days later, a mere six hours before the attorneys for the University could present their offer to Emma Gibeze, a rock concert entrepreneur from Providence contracted for full rights to, and ownership of the dead giant for three thousand dollars, Emma Gibeze had been unable to get her husband to speak since the morning he had stood on the lip of the grave and stared down at the one-eyed being; she was in a panic, there were doctors and hospitals in her future.

Frank Kneiler, who had brought every major rock group of the past decade to the city, rented exposition space in the Providence Civic Center at a ridiculously low rate because it was only the second week in October and the world was quiet. Then he assigned his public-relations firm the task of making the giant a national curiosity. It was not a difficult task.

It was displayed via minicam footage on the evening news of all three major networks. Frank Kneiler's fear for the dramatically staged was not wasted.

The thirty-foot humanoid, pink-skinned and with staring eye malevolently directed at the cameramen's lens, was held in loving close-up on the marble slab Kneiler had had hewn by a local monument contractor.

Pilbeam of Yale came, and Johnson of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and both the Leakeys, and Taylor of Riverside came with Hans Seuss from the University of California at La Jolla. They all said it was genuine. But they could not say where the thing had come from. It was, however, native to the planet thirty feet in height. Cyclopean, as hard as rhinoceros horn, but human. And they all noticed one more thing.

The chest, just over the place where the heartlay, was hideously scarred. As though centuries had jammed their pikes again and again into the flesh when the abomination had been crucified. Terrible weals, puckered skin still angrily crimson against the gentle pink of the otherwise unmarked body.

Unmarked, that is, but for the places where the cunicus had used their nail files and periwinkles to gouge out souvenirs.

And then Frank Kneiler made them go away, shaking their heads in wonder, mad to take the creature back to their laboratories for private study, but thwarted by Kneiler's clear and unshakable ownership. And when the last of them had departed, and

the view of the Cyclops on its slab could be found in magazines and newspapers and even on posters, then Frank Kneiler set up his exposition at the Civic Center.

There, within sight of the Rhode Island State House, atop whose dome stands the twelve-foot-high, gold-leafed statue of the Independent Man.

The cunicus came by the thousands to line up and pay their three dollars a head, as they could file past the dead colossus, blazoned on life-sized thirty-foot-high posters festooning the outer walls of the Civic Center as *The 8th Wonder of the World* (Ninth, reasoned Frank Kneiler with a flash of wit and a sense of history uncommon to popularizers and entrepreneurs, because King Kong had been the Eighth.) It was a gracious homage that did not go unnoticed by fans of the cinematically horrific, and the gesture garnered for Kneiler an acceptance he might not have otherwise known from the cognoscenti.

And there was an almost symphonic correctness to the titan's having been unearthed in Providence, in Rhode Island—in that Yankee state so uncharacteristic of New England—that thus founded by Roger Williams for "those distressed for cause of conscience" and historically identified with independence of thought and freedom of religion, that locale where the odd and the bizarre melded with the mundane. Poe had lived there, and Lovecraft—and they had had strange visions, terrible dreams that had been recorded, that had influenced the course of literature, the moral ownership of the city by the modern coven known as the Mafia, these—and uncountable reports of bizarre happenings, sightings, gatherings, beliefs that made it seem the Providence Journal was an appendix to the writings of Charles Fort—provided a free-floating ambience of the peculiar.

The lines never seemed to grow shorter. The crowds came by the busloads, renting cassette players with background information spoken by a man who had played the lead in a television series dealing with the occult. Schoolchildren were herded past the staring green-eyes in gaggles, teenagers whose senses had been dulled by horror movies came in knots of five and ten, young lovers needing to share stopped and wondered, elderly citizens from whose lives had been leached all wonder smiled and pointed and clucked their tongues, skeptics and cynics and professional debunkers stood hunched in disbelief and came away bewildered.

Frank Kneller found himself involved in a way he had never experienced before, not even with the most artistically rewarded groups he had booked. He went to bed each night exhausted, but uplifted. And he awoke each day feeling his time was being well-spent. When he spoke of the feeling to his oldest friend, his accountant with whom he had shared lodgings during college days, he was rewarded with the word "ennobled." When he dwelled on the word, he came to agree.

Showing the monstrosity was important. He wished with all his heart to know the reason. The single sound that echoed most often through the verdant glade of his thoughts was "why?"

I understand you've taken to sleeping in the rotunda where the giant is on display? The host of the late-night television talk show was leaning forward. The ash on his cigarette was growing to the point where it would drop on his sharply creased slacks. He didn't notice.

Kneller nodded. Yes, that's true. "Why?"

"Why is a question I've been asking myself ever since I bought the great man and started letting people see him."

Well, let's be honest about it," the interviewer said. "You don't let people see the giant; you charge them for the privilege. You're showing an attraction, after all. It's not purely an humanitarian act."

Kneller pursed his lips and nodded. That's right; that's very true. But I'll tell you if I had the wherewithal, I'd do it free of charge. I don't, of course, so I charge what it costs me to rent space at the Civic Center. That much, no more.

The interviewer gave him a sly smile. "Come on."

"No, really, honest to God, I mean it," Frank said quickly. "It's been eleven months, and I can't begin to tell you how many hundreds of thousands of people have come to see the great man, maybe a million or more. I don't know. And everybody who comes goes away feeling a little bit better, a little more important."

"A religious experience?" The interviewer did not smile.

Frank shrugged. "No, what I'm saying is that people feel ennobled in the presence of the great man."

"You keep calling the giant 'the great man.' Strange phrase. Why?"

"Seems right, that's all."

"But you still haven't told me why you

sleep there in the place where his on display every day."

Frank Kneller looked straight into the eyes of the interviewer, who had to live in New York City every day and so might not understand what peace of mind was all about, and he said, "I like the feeling. I feel as if I'm worth the trouble it took to create me. And I don't want to be away from it too long. So I set up a bed in there. It may sound lousy to you, but

But if he had not been compelled to center his life around the immobile figure on the marble slab, then Frank Kneller would not have been there the night the destroyer came.

Moonlight flooded the rotunda through the enormous skylights of the central display area.

Kneller lay on his back, hands behind his head, as usual finding sleep a long way off, yet at peace with himself in the presence of the great man.

The titan lay on his marble slab, tilted against the far wall, thirty feet high, his face now cloaked in shadows. Kneller needed no light. He knew the single great eye was

open, the twin pupils staring straight ahead. They had become companions, the man and the giant. And, as usual, Frank saw something that none of the thousands who had passed before the colossus had ever seen. In the darkness up there near the ceiling, the scars covering the chest of the giant glowed faintly, like amber plankton or the minuscule creatures that cling to limestone walls in the deepest caverns of the earth. When night fell, Frank was overcome with an unbearable sadness. Wherever and however this astounding being had lived in whatever way he had passed through the days and nights that had been his life, he had suffered something more terrible than anyone merely human could conceive. What had done such awesome damage to his flesh, and how he had regenerated even as imperfectly as this, Kneller could not begin to fathom.

But he knew the pain had been interminable and terrible.

He lay there on his back, thinking again as he did every night, of the life the giant had known, and what it must have been for him on this earth.



The questions were too potent, too complex, and beyond Frank Kneller's ability even to pose properly. The titan defied the laws of nature and reason.

And the shadow of the destroyer covered the skylight of the rotunda, and the sound of a great wind rose around the Civic Center and Frank Kneller felt a terror that was impossible to contain. Something was coming from the sky, and he knew without looking up that it was coming for the great man on the slab.

The hurricane wind shrieked past the point of audibility, vibrating in the roots of his teeth. The darkness outside seemed to fall toward the skylight, and with the final sound of enormous wings beating against the night, the destroyer splintered the shatter-proof glass.

Razor-edged stalactites struck the bed, the floor, the walls, one long spear embedded itself through the pillow where Frank's head had lain a moment before, penetrating the mattress and missing him by inches where he cowered in the darkness.

Something enormous was moving beyond the foot of the bed.

Glees lay in a scintillant carpet across the rotunda. Moonlight still shone down and illuminated the display area.

Frank Kneller looked up and saw a nightmare.

The force that had collapsed the skylight was a bird. A bird so enormous he could not catalog it in the same genus with the robin he had found outside his bedroom window when he was a child, the robin that had flown against the pane when sunlight had turned it to a mirror, the robin that had struck and fallen and lain there till he came out of the house and picked it up. Its blood had been watery, and he could feel its heart beating against his palm. It had been defenseless and weak and dying in fear, he could feel that it was dying in fear. And Frank had rushed in to his mother, crying and had begged her to help restore the creature to the sky. And his mother had gotten the old eyedropper that had been used to put cod-liver oil in Frank's milk when he was younger, and she had tried to get the robin to take some sugar-water.

But it had died.

Tiny, it had died in fear.

The thing in the rotunda was of that genus, but it was neither any nor fearful.

Like no other bird he had ever seen, like no other bird that had ever been seen, like no other bird that had ever existed. Sinbad had known such a bird, perhaps, but no

other human eyes had ever beheld such a destroyer. It was gigantic. Frank Kneller could not estimate its size, because it was almost as tall as the great man, and when it made the hideous watery cawing sound and puffed out its bellows chest and jerked its wings into a billowing canopy, the pinfeathers scraped the walls of the rotunda on either side. The walls were seventy-two feet apart.

The vulture gave a hellish scream and sank its somber talons in the petrified flesh of the great man, its vicious beak in the chest, in the puckered area of scars that had glowed softly in the shadows.

It ripped away the flesh as hard as rhinoceros horn.

Its head came away with the beak locked around a chunk of honey flesh. Then, as Kneller watched, the flesh seemed to lose its rigidity, it softened, and blood ran off the carion, crow's killer beak. And the great man groaned.

The eye blinked.

The bird struck again, tossing goblets of meat across the rotunda.

Frank felt his brain exploding. He could not bear to see this.

But the vulture worked at its task, nipping out the area of chest where the heart of the great man lay under the scar tissue. Frank Kneller crawled out of the shadows and stood helpless. The creature was immense. He was the robin, pitiful and tiny.

Then he saw the fire extinguisher in its brackets on the wall, and he grabbed the pillow from the bed and rushed to the compartment holding the extinguisher and he smashed the glass with the pillow protecting his hand. He wrenches the extinguisher off its moorings and rushed the black bird, yanking the handle on the extinguisher so hard the wire broke without effort. He aimed it up at the vulture just as it threw back its head to rid itself of its carion load, and the violent Halon 1301 mixture sprayed in its eyes, filled its mouth. The vulture gave one last violent scream, tore its claws loose, and arched up into the darkness with a spasmodic beating of wings that caught Frank Kneller across the face and threw him thirty feet into a corner. He struck the wall, everything slid toward gray.

When he was able to get to his knees, he felt an excruciating pain in his side and knew at once several ribs had been broken. All he could think of was the great man.

He crawled across the floor of the rotunda to the base of the slab, and looked up. There, in the shadows.

The great man, in terrible pain, was staring down at him.

A moan escaped the huge lips. What can I do? Kneller thought, desperately.

And the words were in his head. Nothing. It will come again.

Kneller looked up. Where the scar tissue had glowed faintly, the chest was ripped open, and the great man's heart lay there in pulsing blood, part of it torn away.

Now I know who you are, Kneller said. Now I know your name.

The great man smiled a strange, shy smile. The one gray-green eye made the expression somehow winsome. Yes, he said, yes, you know who I am.

Your tears mingled with the earth to create us.

Yes.

You gave us fire.

Yes, and wisdom.

And you've suffered for it ever since.

Yes.

I have to know, Frank Kneller said. I have to know if you were what we were before we became what we are now.

The sound of the great wind was rising again. The destroyer was in the night on its way back. The chemicals of man could not drive it away from the task it had to perform, could not drive it away for long.

It comes again, the great man said in Kneller's mind. And I will not come again.

Tell me! Where you what we were?

The shadow fell across the rotunda, and darkness came down upon them as the great man said, in that final moment. No, I am what you would have become.

And the carion crow sent by the gods struck him as he said one more thing.

When Frank Kneller regained consciousness, hours later, there on the floor where the scissoring pain of his broken ribs had dropped him, he heard those last words reverberating in his mind. And heard them endlessly all the days of his life.

No, I am what you would have become if you had been worthy.

And the silence was deeper that night across the face of the world, from pole to pole, deeper than it had ever been before in the life of the creatures that called themselves humans.

But not as deep as it would soon become.

HARLAN ELLISON

AN APPRECIATION BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

When he writes he speaks with his own voice—which is a voice like nobody else's: an instantaneously recognizable voice even if you have not—as I have—been hearing it for thirty years. Sometimes the sound is a snarl—very often, in fact—and sometimes it's a seductive whisper and sometimes it's a roar of outrage. He is in a state of outrage much of the time, and much of the time it's justifiable anger. It seems to be inherent in his bones. He answers the phone, nearly always with a rough-roused intonation: "Yeah?"—as if the caller has phoned thirteen times in the last hour to sell subscriptions to the *Spotted Swine Journal*. If the caller turns out to be someone he happens to love, and there are a good many people in that category, his tone softens remarkably with the next syllable. But first you get that roar, no matter who you are. When they call up from Stockholm, twenty-five years from now, to tell him he's won the Nobel, that gentle unsuspecting Swede is going to get the roar. If they don't call up from Stockholm somewhere in the next twenty-five years, he'll probably call them to find out why not, and they'd better have a good answer.)

The fiction always sounds like Harlan—people tend to call him Harlan, not Ellison, especially people who don't know him but would like to pretend they do—even though the fiction is remarkably variable. Some of it can leave you numb with awe and admiration, some of it can make you weep, some of it is merely baffling and maddening, and some leads you to wonder how its author ever got anything published. Harlan has been so erratic over the three decades of his professional career that a good many of his stories have that effect of apparently invalidating all the rest of his work, until you take a second look at the rest of his work and see that it isn't so. He writes, as he lives, in a white heat, and sometimes he can focus that heat so it can sear holes in your soul, and sometimes he simply splashes it around in all directions and gives everybody a hot time. But it always sounds like Harlan: the good and the bad, the brilliant and the astonishingly off-the-mark. It is as though his fictions are discrete slices chopped from an ongoing monologue, a frenetic and exhaustive and interlarded and altogether unique monologue that has been going on, with scarcely a pause for breath or sleep, since the spring of 1934.

He says he is not a science fiction writer. Most of the time I believe him, even though much of the stuff he writes is populated by time machines and androids and people who wander into alternate universes. (Much of it isn't, also.) I think he writes a kind of meta-science fiction, a unique genre that is made up of bits and pieces of science fiction sometimes, stray concepts he encountered in Heinlein or Andre Norton or Sturgeon when he was a kid and has been marinating in his subconscience ever since. But it really doesn't matter to him whether Mars is the fourth planet from the sun or the sixth, and it shouldn't matter to you either. If it did matter to him, he could look it up—there's a *Ullmann's* right back of his desk—or if that happened to be too much trouble, he could phone Paul Anderson or Asimov, or even his friend Bradbury, who probably could give him the right answer. But although knowing the correct position of Mars is of great concern to an astronomer and of even greater concern to an astronaut making the first expedition there, it doesn't help much in an understanding of what we like to call the human condition, and it is the human condition, and the inhuman condition, that form the center of Harlan's preoccupation as a writer. It happens that he finds it valuable, much of the time, to cloak his explorations in the fabric of science fiction. Science fiction imagery comes naturally to him. (He has a row of gargoyle heads on the facade of his house, too, and the house itself is a whole other story.) But if you turn to his fiction to learn where Mars is, you are doing something quite beside the point. Any almanac can tell you that Mars is closer to the sun than Jupiter and farther from it than Earth, and when you've learned that, you've added another nice little fact to your collection. But what Harlan's fiction tells you is not the stuff of science exams; it is the raw and bloody stuff of life itself, tossed around a long while in that mix-master of a brain and set forth, at white heat, on an Olympia manual typewriter in that unique tone of voice, which can be parodied easily enough but never duplicated. He takes you and he shakes you, and he does it because he has been shaken himself, and wants you to know what it feels like. There is only one of him. As I have often said, that is quite enough, but how pale and drab our world would have been if we had not had that one!

SCIENCE FICTION ORIGINALS



Once again, *Omni* includes never-before-published stories, while for the first time, it presents a collection of original pictures.

In his selection of stories, the editor considers, at the manuscript stage, how well each reads, what sort of ideas it engages, what furtherance of the SF genre it achieves. One thing he does not consider is the author's prestige. Which is just as well, because none of the original stories finally chosen for this section is by a household-name writer. Nevertheless, each has mastered the craft — each story is well-made, independently voiced, and compelling in subject.

'A Blossom in Ares' by Jack Massa looks at one of the thornier questions that Saint Thomas Aquinas considered in *Summa Theologica*: the proper relationship of man to God and God to man. Further, it considers intergalactic-traveling mankind faced with a condition in which humans are not the only beings created in God's image.

It is an arguable tenet in our technological society, and an article of faith in science fiction, that all problems are solvable, given sufficient time and knowledge. In 'A Brief Dance to the Music of the Spheres,' Michael Kurland glimpses a time when all problems have been solved, when humanity is master of the universe and when the boundaries of that universe may be far too small.

Some sufferers believe that the ways of the Lord surpass understanding — so much so that they feel an impulse to fall on their knees, raise their arms to the heavens, and scream, "Why me?" The protagonist of Michael Cassutt's "Holy Father" is such an unfortunate, and his misery arises from a circumstance of rebirth.

Melisa Michaels's 'Intermezzo' reconsiders General Sherman's observation that war is hell. It also speculates that peace could be just as hellish.

Rowena Morrill is a frequent contributor to *Omni*, and her dynamic, often violent paintings are so highly regarded that more of her work was requested specifically for this volume. The result is a vivid display of ten science-fiction/science-fantasy artworks.



A BLOSSOM IN ARES

Was it holier to save the alien species or to break his sacred vow?

BY JACK MASSA

After my fourth year as a novice I was ordered by my superiors to spend a year in retreat: a year of isolation and soul-searching prior to speaking my final vows. My assignment was to the Brotherhood's hermitage in the Ares Vallis in the midlatitudes of Mars. I rode a space liner out to Lowell City Station, which circles Mars just beyond the orbit of Phobos. From the city's observation deck the planet can be seen, all colored brown and orange, with wisps of cloud trailing about the poles. Although Planet Engineering has been at work on Mars for over forty years, the goal of an earthlike biosphere is still centuries away. Meanwhile, the surface-dwellers are mostly solitaires: lone-wolf researchers preferring to work in private, couples and small families who value their isolation, sequestered brothers and nuns. Most of the brothers are members of my order: the Brotherhood of St. James.

Following a week of rest and final instruction at our mission on Lowell, I rode a shuttleflyer down to Chryse Planitia. The craft landed at Vlieg, a glassfibre-clad town of three hundred, named for the first unmanned probe, which set down here last century. From Vlieg I drove an airwheeled camper across the ancient seabed and up into Ares Vallis, a wide, rocky channel cut eons ago by rushing water. The channel and

PAINTING BY
WOLFGANG HUTTER

sloping valley walls are everywhere cloaked with lichens. gray-white tundra moss imported from Earth as a primary tool of the terraforming. Above the lichen fields loom coral- and rust-colored cliffs, sculpted to jaggedness by ages of ferocious dust storms. The sky is the palest of blues and, in the morning, silvery mists condense on the ground to moisten the flora.

Those first days the landscape impressed me as beautiful, yet terribly lonely. I recall thinking what a precious gift, and an awful responsibility, that God has given us this world and the power to reshape it.

On the afternoon of the fourth day I arrived at the hermitage. I parked the camper alongside the entry port and extended the airlock corridor. As I stepped from the driver's seat, the hatch into the dome opened, and I saw Brother Jerome.

Tall and slim, in his late forties, Jerome was dressed as I, in hooded coveralls and crucifix. He was at the end of a mobile retreat, having spent three years at the hermitage. He smiled amiably and shook my hand. I was the first person he had seen since his arrival in Ares.

Jerome helped me unload the boxes of supplies and equipment I had driven in from Viking, then took me on a tour of the hermitage. The dome is a rectangle with rounded corners, it covers about an acre. The space inside is pressurized and shielded from the ultraviolet rays that scour the planet's surface. The glassless material is clear, but the difference in internal and external atmosphere gives the interior light a hazy, dreamlike appearance. Brother Jerome showed me the two-room black-walled hut that serves as office, chapel and living quarters; then led me outside to the garden.

Gardening in the domes started as horticultural research: the cultivation of earth plants selected for their adaptability and hardiness. The gardening has proved so successful that most surface-dwellers have been able to abandon the use of hydroponic food tanks and artificial oxydizers. In his three years at the hermitage Brother Jerome had done even better. Besides a healthy selection of vegetables, grains, and berries, he had cultivated flowers.

Rows of multicolored zinnias, hyacinths and tulips lent their fragrance to the humid air. Even a few fragile orchids and dwarf rose bushes climbed boldly from the desiccated and fertilized Martian soil. I was startled and vaguely dismayed by this unexpected profusion of blossoms. After the

dingy, lichen-gray wilderness, the garden struck me as rather gaudy and profane. Still, tending these plants would be a major part of my duties, and I listened with strict attention as Jerome instructed me in the procedures and schedules he had developed.

Stepping lightly in the low gravity, we came finally to a far corner of the dome, to a well-tended plot reserved for indigenous Martian plants. These were small, delicate blue sprouts capped with tiny orange bulbs, a short vine clinging feebly to the soil, a few languid ferns with translucent stalks and drooping gossamer fronds. Of course their spores had lain frozen in the dust some ninety thousand years. That Planet Engineering had assigned the rare seeds to Brother Jerome at all was a result of his gardening success. That he had coaxed the seeds to even fragile life was proof of his great skill.

"Are they not wonderful, Brother Alfred?" he asked. "To have survived so long on a dead world and now to flourish again!"

They are as vital as any I saw in the growth tanks on Lowell," I said with admiration. "You are to be commended."

Oh, I did not speak to elicit praise for myself, but for God. It is the magnificence of His handiwork that moves me to marvel. I shall miss my garden, now that I am leaving.

You will encounter God's handiwork elsewhere, surely.

Yes, of course. He smiled pensively as he looked back across the dome. "But these plants I have tended have become very important to me. I hope you will not think me too seriously deranged if I confess that I've gotten into the habit of speaking to them, encouraging them to grow, saying how much I appreciate their beauty. One does get lonely here."

I nodded. I respect the loneliness will be difficult for me. I have always been of gregarious temperament, perhaps too much so. I suspect my brother Superior sent me here as a test to see if my commitment to the order would hold up in isolation.

"God will test you with loneliness," Jerome said. "But if you turn to Him, you will be comforted. Be sure to observe Mass every day."

"I intend to study," I said. St. Paul Acquiesces."

"I found I read little after the first few months," Jerome remarked. "Come, I have one more seedbed to show you."

We stepped over to a bordered plot set

between the wall of the dome and a bench that faced the tulips and orchids. The soil was loosely packed and wetted, but empty of any plant.

"I doubt now anything will come of this," Jerome said, "but twenty-seven days ago I planted a Martian seed here. That is, I believe it was a seed, though it was larger than any I'd seen before and I could find nothing to match it in Horticulture Section's catalog books. I discovered it myself in the ruins south of here. You do know there is a Martian villa a few kilometers down the valley?"

"Yes, it was mentioned."

A beautiful place. To me, their architecture is more graceful and lovely than anything in human history. I've stopped there often while doing survey work. I found this seed on the ground after a windstorm, not in the garden plot, but in one of the smaller blocks. A horticulture team dug up the garden years ago. Anyway, if the seed should sprout, you might drop me a message in care of our mission in Kamchatka. I'd be most interested to know.

I promised I would send the message. We returned to the black-walled hut for evening prayers and supper. Brother Jerome left in the camper the next morning.

During my first days at the hermitage, I adhered to a strict routine. Rising an hour before dawn, I would wash and say morning prayers; then leave my cell for the outer room. I placed bread and wine on the altar and lit candles, then turned on the screen that hangs on the wall below the crucifix. I knelt at the altar rail while the screen displayed the day's Mass—broadcast from our mission on Lowell and stored on a celloid loop by the hermitage computer. As decreed by the First Interplanetary Council of 2537, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ was valid for me, as for all who received the signal in good faith, despite the intervening factors of distance and time.

After Mass I would take breakfast, then go and see to my duties about the dome. The tasks are generally simple: adjusting environmental controls, watering and tending the garden, recording data on the growth and condition of the plants. Occasionally the thermal well would go dry and a new line would have to be drilled to tap the permafrost, but this takes only a few minutes. Like all who are sent to the surface, I had been thoroughly trained in the various maintenance and survival duties. They generally take only two or three hours of

each day to complete.

The rest of my time was for study, contemplation, and prayer. I read the Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, a sampling of the Old Testament. I also scheduled a little time each evening to peruse the writings of St. James, the twentieth-century American who lauded our order. Unlike other theologians of the recent past, who have allowed themselves to be swayed by humanism or Eastern mysticism, Brother Jerome insisted on firm allegiance to traditional Church doctrine, combining this position with a life of active service in the world. It was his balanced approach to this life and the next that first attracted me to the Brotherhood. I have always been sociable, exceedingly fond of other people. Yet from my teenage years I had felt that human relationships alone were not enough; that without a vital relationship with God, my life would be empty and incomplete. In the Brotherhood I had found this strong spiritual commitment while also developing rich friendships with my brothers and those we serve.

That is why I regarded my year at the hermitage as a challenge. Being without the companionship and reinforcement of others would test my faith and willingness to serve. In the wilderness, one had only God to turn to. During my first days on Mars I spent many hours on my knees at the altar rail, before the crucifix and the blank screen, praying to feel God's presence.

On my twenty-first day at the hermitage Brother Jerome's unique native seed sprouted. I later learned that the plant had been active underground for some time, building a wide-ranging root system. Its first appearance in the light was as a tiny emerald stem, full of bubbly sap.

I filed a report, including wivographs, to Planet Engineering. As I had promised, I also sent a brief message to Brother Jerome back on Earth.

The next day I received a reply from Horticulture Section, confirming that the plant was a hitherto-unknown species and instructing me to monitor it carefully. They designated the plant Area Valley-7 and provided details of what they considered optimal soil composition and watering schedule.

The plant grew at a remarkable rate. By Day-3 the stem was eight centimeters high and four other stems had appeared alongside it, forming a ring. By Day-8 the stems were approaching a half meter in height and clusters of bluish leaves were unfold-

ing around their base. By Day-16 the plant had assumed what proved to be its mature, proflouwing shape. I've spindly stems now over a meter high, an outer ruff of feathery blue leaves, and in the center an orange bulb with a wrinkled, silky texture.

I had occasion to observe the plant afternoons as well as mornings, since I had started doing some of my reading in the garden, using the bench Brother Jerome had built. I rationalized that the light was better, that the higher oxygen level might keep me more alert. But the truth was, I felt less lonely in the garden.

The dutifully observed hours of prayer and contemplation were not bringing me the peace of mind I sought. My thoughts kept wandering back to Earth, to my friends at the novitiate, to girls I had flirted with in my teens. The more I strained for stillness of mind, that I might feel God near, the more remote God seemed.

At least in the light and sweet air of the garden, in the flamboyant beauty of Brother Jerome's flowers, there was immediate evidence of God's presence of His Being.

I did not understand this consciously at

the time. Indeed, I regarded my preference for the garden over the chapel as vaguely sinful. Whenever my eyes would leave the printed page to roam among the leaves and colored blooms, I would scold myself and force my mind back to its studies.

After forty days inside the dome I left for the first of my scheduled surveys—it being my duty to take regular climatological readings up and down the valley. That first morning I was due to head south.

Wearing a pressurized suit, I stepped from the airlock and removed the tarpaulin from the hermitage three-wheel. I started the engine and set the viewscreen for a map of the checkpoints, then rode down the slope to the valley floor.

The day was clear and very warm for Mars; temperature and barometer were high enough that a string of puddles had formed along the overbed. I rode on the sunk side of the valley to take full advantage of the heat. My task was mainly to survey the health and progress of the lichen fields. I would stop at the various checkpoints, snap a wivograph, then make a rec-



ond of temperature, pressure, and wind velocity, as well as the levels of oxygen, nitrogen, and ultraviolet.

Some eight kilometers down the valley I rounded an outcropping and caught my first glimpse of the Marian villa. It lay on a rounded hilltop, a tumble of eroded blocks with strange, inward-curving walls and lean, broken pillars. I had forgotten the ruins were near and was momentarily shocked to come upon their elegance in that wasteland. I thought of how great a shock it must have been to the first explorers who discovered the great city of Hellenia Planeta.

When that discovery was made in 2016 by the second manned mission, the accepted scientific belief held that Mars was and always had been lifeless. Yet the explorers brought back proof of a civilization that seemingly had appeared full-blown on the planet, capable of building a huge stone city hundreds of kilometers long. Most of the city had been eroded by wind and dust, but enough remained to hint at an elaborate architecture whose closest earthly parallels, on a far tinier scale, are the remaining Minoan palaces of ancient Crete.

Most astonishing of all, it was evident that the culture had flourished a mere ninety thousand years ago, when Mars is known to have been as frigid and airless as it was before Day-1 of the terraforming. Later excavations uncovered seeds in some of the walled enclosures, seeds like the ones Planet Engineering had assigned to Brother Jerome. In fact, all the seeds ever found on Mars have come from archeological sites.

The sum of these apparent contradictions led scientists to theorize that the builders of the city were not indigenous to Mars after all. The theory, still the prevailing explanation fifty years later, holds that the Martians (as everyone still calls them) were in fact a spacefaring race, nomads from outside our solar system. But as to why they settled on Mars, why they left, and whether or not they ever had any contact with Earth—all these remain mysteries.

Besides the great city of Hellenia, numerous smaller sites have been explored and cataloged all over the southern and middle latitudes. The site in Ares Vallis, among the most northern, is classified as a villa because of its size and layout.

As I leaned on the handrails and gazed up at the ruins, I thought of Brother Jerome and his fascination for the place, how he had confessed to stopping there often. I

was tempted to take a ride up the hill myself, but I repressed the impulse.

I had not been sent to Mars to pursue idle diversions. I chided myself that even in this wilderness I could find something worldly to distract me from my duties. I put the three-wheel in gear and rode off toward the next checkpoint.

I was sitting on the bench in the garden, reading the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, on the afternoon I first noticed the plant breathing. I do not know how long it took the subtle, steady rustling to penetrate my awareness. Suddenly I looked up, hearing the sound and dimly aware that I had been hearing it for some time.

I turned and looked at the plant. The orange bulb, which by now had grown to the size of a human torso, was swelling and collapsing in rhythm with the faint noise—undeniably respiring.

Nothing I had heard or read of Martian flora had prepared me for this. In a state of eerie amazement, I stood watching the plant for some minutes, then turned and hurried to the hut.

I sat down at the console, intending to file an immediate report. With stiff and clumsy fingers I typed the entry code. Then I stopped, gazing at the all but empty screen.

Receiving such a report from the surface, the officials at Lowell would probably conclude that the sender of the message had lost his mind. They'd be more likely to send down a couple of brothers to rescue me than a horticulture team. Suppose whoever they sent got here and found the plant no longer breathing? I had no equipment to record the breathing, and no way of telling if it was more than a temporary aberration. The last thing I wanted was to cause unwarranted excitement and to break the solitude of my retreat over what was—or could appear to be—nothing.

Better to wait and continue monitoring the plant myself, at least for a while, and then to make a full report. I shut off the terminal and hastened back to the garden.

After that day I watched over the plant with increasing attentiveness and fascination. I did more of my reading in the garden so I would be there to notice any change. I measured and remeasured the plant's dimensions each day, and took scrupulous care with the wording of my entries in the observation book.

The growth of the plant's stems had tapered

off. By Day-41 they had stopped growing entirely, standing between 2.13 and 2.27 meters. The feathery leaves around the base continued to thicken, while the size of the inner, breathing portion increased dramatically, its diameter doubling between Days 30 and 50. The breathing continued strong and steady, never perceptibly altering.

I still had not filed a report on the plant. I kept thinking I must, but something held me back. Perhaps I was being overly cautious, still afraid the breathing might cease before anyone could arrive to verify it. Perhaps the plant had already made telepathic contact and its mental influence held me back. Or I dare suppose that it was rather God's will that I should remain alone with the plant? I certainly did not think so at the time.

Indeed, as my watchfulness over the plant intensified, I began to feel guilty. Even when I tried to study indoor, thoughts of the plant kept intruding. At times I would get up in the night and walk out to the edge of the dome to be sure the plant was still breathing. During Mass I would pray for the health and success of the plant before anything else.

Finally I decided my attachment to the plant was verging on a sinful obsession and must be broken. The schedule from Horticulture Section called for watering every three days. It was a struggle, but I kept away from the plant for that long.

When I returned to the far end of the dome on the third day, I recall feeling excited anticipation, as if dimly suspecting something momentous was about to occur. I adjusted the nozzle on the watering hose and let it sprinkle over the outer leaves and the soil. The plant seemed to catch its breath.

Tender you have returned. I stood there frozen, except for my hand, which trembled, causing the water to spray widely.

Do not leave me again for so long. The voice was soft, high pitched, and musical, something between an insect's buzz and notes struck lightly on a xylophone. I could find neither voice nor words to answer.

I feel you are astonished, my tender. I have now grown enough to converse with you. Do not be dismayed.

I—I was I, expecting. I don't understand how you can speak, how you can know my language.

I touch the words as thoughts in your mind. Your mind, your whole being, is reflected in me. You are my tender.

I realized my feet were soaked and managed to turn off the hose. I reached for the notebook in my pocket, then let my arm fall. Even if my hands would stop shaking, how could I write this?

"Tender, you are disturbed. Do I not please you?"

"Yes. But this is uncanny. Plants, even the plants of this world, are not known for speaking."

You also are different from what I expected, though I have only dim memories of other tenders. I have been long in the seed."

"Yes," I replied. "A very long time."

Recovering from shock, my mind was racing, trying to assemble some sort of explanation. I did not for a moment doubt my sanity, though looking back I can see it might have been understandable to have done so. But at the time, it was plain I was hearing a voice, and that it came from the plant before me. Certainly the orange bulb was large enough now to contain a complex brain and something to function as a larynx. I am no biologist, but I had read enough at school to know that genes contain innate intelligence, that they can evolve into incredibly varied shapes in order to survive. That the vanished settlers of Mars had cultivated sentient plants in their gardens, plants that reflected the minds of those who tended them, was certainly in the bounds of the possible. I dropped to my knees, recalling Brother Jerome's remark about the magnificence of God's handiwork.

"Are the other tenders gone?" the plant asked.

"Yes, long ago. You are the only one of your kind known to have survived."

"That is lonely," the plant whispered. "But I shall adapt to you, tender. We shall survive."

"We will help you to flourish," I said. "I am going to summon others, experts who will—"

"No," the plant said. "I am already reflecting you. You are different from the old tenders and I must change to fit you. The presence of others would make it harder."

I do not understand.

You are my tender, only you. Do not leave me again for so long. Do not let others near me.

"But I don't know how to care for you."

"I will tell you. Come closer. Touch me. I must have your touch if I am to grow in your reflection."

My belly clenched with panic, but I

moved forward on my knees. I extended my hands and laid fingertips on the petal-soft, breathing bulb.

"Yes," the plant whispered. "I will change according to your touch. My blooming is still many days off. There is time."

I don't know exactly how long I stayed in that position, touching the plant. When I finally stirred from the spot, the glare of afternoon had dimmed to blue twilight.

I did not go to bed that night, but knelt in the chapel, my soul in turmoil, and prayed to God for guidance. Moved by the plant's pleadings, I had decided not to report what had happened—since a report would certainly bring visitors from Lowell, to investigate my sanity if not the truth of my claims. Clearly my duty lay in tending to the plant myself, until she felt ready to have others in her presence. (I had already begun to think of the plant as female, based on its voice and the personality I sensed behind the voice.)

But this decision to keep the sentence of the plant a secret, hung a weight on my conscience. If I should fail to keep the plant alive, I might be destroying mankind's one chance for communication with this alien species.

And if I did bring the plant to bloom, what might be the cost to my soul? For as I knelt, touching the bulb in the stillness of the dome, a kind of sympathetic ecstasy had stolen over me, an emotional thrill bordering on the sensual. If tending the plant before had come close to an obsession, how obsessed might I become?

I received no plain answer during that cold night in the chapel. Finally I fell asleep, leaning on the altar rail.

When I woke, daylight was beaming through the stained glass above the altar. I gazed up at the crucifix and begged once again for guidance. God has placed me here to tend this plant, I thought, but I need not distract me from my other duties. I determined to maintain a strict schedule as I had during my first days at the hermitage. There was no reason my taking care of the plant should interfere with my studies or prayers.

Perhaps I was deluding myself, pledging to the service of two masters. But dazzled as I was by shock and sleeplessness, I did not think of it that way.

In the days that followed I kept to the schedule I set for myself. After finishing my chores about the dome and the garden, I

would pass the afternoon in the chapel, with only my books and the altar to occupy my eyes. At sunset I would go to the far corner of the dome, sit down on the loose-packed soil, and place my fingers on the silky, breathing bulb. I would shut my eyes and inhale the scent of the wet soil, mixed with the flower's faint perfume. Then my thoughts and anxieties would disappear, my spirit filling with serenity and joy.

I recall those days as supremely happy. For the first time since coming to Mars, I felt my life was in balance. Communing with the plant made me feel closer to God, and I stopped worrying that my attachment to her might be sinful.

I became so calm and confident of mind that I began to do some of my reading in the garden again. Only now I would sit further away on the bench, facing the plant and reading to her aloud.

One afternoon, as I read from the opening of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, she interrupted me.

"Tender, I do not understand what is said in your book. Always you read to me of God that has created the world, that is invisible. How it is said that people are wicked for worshipping the things of the world instead of God, who created them."

"Yes."

But earlier your man of the book says that God's divine nature is to be seen in the things He has made.

"Yes. But the things of the world are not to be worshipped. They are there to point the way to God, who is beyond the world."

I have memory of the old race of tenders," the plant said. "They saw divine nature in all visible things, and deemed all worthy of worship."

So the Marmians were pantheists. I thought, puzzled. I smiled at the notion of labeling them with human terms.

"Would your man of the book condemn them also?"

"He does condemn their point of view," I admitted.

And do you condemn them, tender?"

"No," I said after a moment's reflection. Who was I to judge the religious perceptions of an alien race? God reveals Himself in different ways at different times and places.

This thought was to stay in my mind through all that happened later.

As the plant continued to grow, her memory of the old race of tenders improved. From what I could learn, it appears the the-

ary that they came from outside our solar system is correct. But according to the plant's recollections, they were more tourists than nomads, traveling from star to star to satisfy aesthetic whim rather than necessity. Cultivating the sentient flowers was a feature of their aesthetic culture. The flowers were raised as companions: to converse with their tenders and sing to them. The tenders commonly became deeply attached to their flowers. That her seed had been left behind, she thought, must have been by oversight.

The plant was also curious, but more about me personally than about the human race. We had many conversations, but one in particular stays in my mind: it occurred a few days before her blooming.

Tender: why is there no female of your species living with you?

I explained to her about my vocation, and the vow of celibacy I had taken.

Your allegiance to God denies you the comfort of a mate? This is a cold, wintry God you worship.

He is a jealous God. I felt a pang of guilt at saying so.

Why are you disturbed?

Sometimes I wonder if I'm neglecting my duty to God by paying so much attention to you.

Is it not your duty to tend the garden? Has God not given this to you?

Yes. Miraculously. God has given me you to tend.

"My time of blooming is near," the plant said. "You will be kind to me, tender?"

Perhaps her tone of voice triggered the memory. I thought of Bernice, a red-haired girl I had almost fallen in love with the summer I turned eighteen. I remembered her anger and hurt when I told her we had to break up, that I had decided to enter the novitiate.

"Yes," I told the flower. "Of course I'll be kind to you." But I wondered just what I was promising, and how I could make such a promise so readily without being sure.

On Day 71 a series of divisions appeared on the bulb, demanding the petals about to unfold. That day the plant told me in a quiet voice she was about to change, and that she would be unable to speak to me until the blooming was complete.

The next three days were a nightmare of nervousness and apprehension: I could not concentrate on studying or working in the garden. I could think of nothing but the plant. I gave it extra water and added nutri-

ents to the soil. Though I knew it was too late for this to help, I spent most of my time sitting on the ground watching the plant or praying in the chapel that it would be well.

About an hour before dawn on the fourth day, I woke on the floor of the chapel. I stood, aching, and looked out the doorway. Dim nightlights illuminated the garden. Did I hear her voice, or was she calling me by telepathy?

Either way I knew the blossom had opened.

My heart was racing as I hurried across the garden. Photos was a dim blade glinting through the dome. Below where the moon hung I could see her standing in front of the spayed petals.

She stood with palms at her sides, open to me, the naked figure of a young woman, rounded and soft; her white skin shiny with lust. A leathy tail dragged like a serpent from the base of her spine, linking her to the flower's past. Thick red hair curled past her shoulders. Her face was the face of Bernice, copied from my mind. But her eyes were alien, luminous emeralds.

"Tender! I am here for you. I remember! I was shuddering."

"Do I not please you?" she asked. Frightened, it seemed, almost to panic.

Then came the dreadful understanding. The Martians had bred these flowers not only as companions but as paramechs. That was why her adapting to me was so crucial. She needed me to reproduce.

She stepped closer, straining the length of her vine-tail. Her hands stretched out to me.

"Tender? "

It backed away, horrified, yet conscious of an answering yearning in myself.

"I must please you," she said.

I was reminded again of Bernice, the pain in her eyes when I had rejected her love. That same love pleaded with me now through the glittering eyes of the flower.

No, it was trickery, illusion. The plant had stolen the image, had used my memory to construct this body cell by cell to tempt me to use me.

But my body stirred in response to her beauty, and I knew I must either destroy the flower or give myself up to her. And I did not know which would be the greater sin.

Tender! I need you.

I turned and ran. The story of Abraham and Isaac flashed in my mind: the sacrifice of the loved one. I stumbled over the corner of a flowerbed, got up, and ran to the toolshed. I flung open the door and snatched

up the first implement I found that would do the job—a hatchet. Crying like one wounded, I ran back across the dome.

Seeing the hatchet, the flower knelt before me in resignation. "It is better if you kill me outright."

Not her! I thought: me. I would use the blade on myself, destroying the occasion of sin, and still preserve the plant for humanity. In my hysteria, it seemed so logical. I wondered why I had not thought of it before.

But the flower shook her head. "Kill me. I will die anyway. Without your seed there will be no more of us."

The sorrow in her voice brought from within me a response of overwhelming love. My wrist jerked and the hatchet fell to the ground.

I knelt before the flower and raised her chin with my hand. My fingers, cold and hard, caressed her. My lips quivered as they tasted her nectar. Soon I was naked, sprawling in the wet soil, clutching her against me. As I entered her cool, moist interior, her alien eyes gleamed with rapture.

In the following days I did not hear Mass or tend the other plants or read scriptures. But I thought of God constantly, the God whose immanence in the visible world—the God of the pantheists and the Martians—I worshipped that God often, and my altar was the body of the flower.

Eight or nine or ten days after she bloomed, her tail broke off. That evening, as she lay in my arms, she told me I had loved her well; that she knew her body had adapted and would bear healthy seeds.

In the morning she no longer breathed. Dazed, I lifted her in my arms and placed her among the withered petals, in the circle of leathery leaves.

It was many days before I could bring myself to report what had happened. By then the plant had shriveled, leaving a tom husk and a handful of large white seeds.

The party from Lowell is arriving tomorrow to collect the seeds and take me back to the mission. I have no doubt that Horticulture Section will cultivate the seeds and that eventually my story will be verified.

My own future is less certain. I do not know if I will remain with the brothers. I broke my vow of celibacy, yet I feel no remorse. Indeed, I feel God moved me to what I did.

If it is a sin to love God's creation more than God, then I have sinned. But I am no longer certain God can even be known apart from the creation given to us.

PICTORIAL
NUMBER TWO



ROWENA
MORRILL
ARTIST

• It's enormously important to me to make a beautiful painting, to create something now that may be known, understood, and liked by people in the future. •

ROWENA'S WORLD: HEROIC. FANTASTIC. VISIONARY



An excellent pictorialist, Rosemary Morrill is a frequent *Omni* contributor. Her vibrant colors, heroic vision, and vivid imagination

are distinctive. A dozen major publishers reproduce her art, and it is frequently exhibited in galleries and museums throughout America.



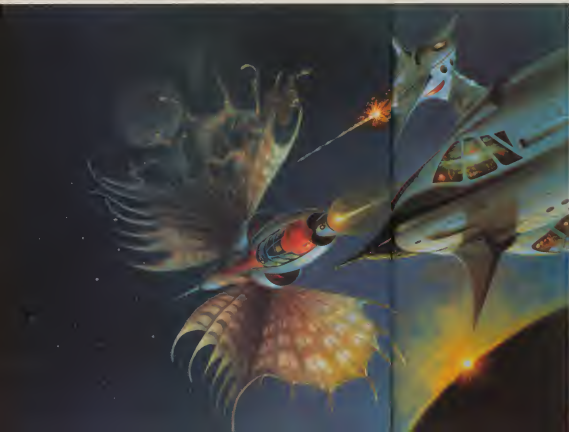


Hailed by colleagues such as science-fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon and fellow artist Boris Vallejo, Rowena is esteemed for her insight and sensitivity. This summer, Schanes and Schanes of San Diego is publishing a limited, signed portfolio of seven paintings. This fall, Pocket Books will publish *The Fantastic Art of Rowena Morrill*.



Rowena's interest in art
flowered in college. But twelve
years elapsed before
she perfected her technique,
largely self-taught.

Now, not only does
her work hang in museums
but also in the private
collections of connois-
seurs worldwide.





*Faster than light, he had
larked about the cosmos for millennia
but had he ever left home?*

A BRIEF DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

BY MICHAEL KURLAND

I have traveled this limitless universe for many tens of thousands of years, flitting where I wish at speeds that photons envy. I have moved backward through time and met myself coming and going, and explored the *C* paradises as eagerly as others rummage through attic trunks full of old dreams. And I am not bored.

My name is Deradan, and I am immortal, and I am omniscient, or as omniscient as practical in this uncausal universe, and I used to be a man.

"Tell me how it was, Deradan. Tell me about the old days," Thrayna said, perching on a silver crystal, her voice the tinkle of sapphire bells with ruby overtones. She was born after the transformation, and she loves the stories of the olden days, when we were mortal and the worlds were young.

"We lived on Earth," I told her, "billions of us. All crisscrossed together on a single planet."

Her eyes enlarged and I could see galaxies reflected in their depths. "Earth," she said. "Where is Earth?"

"I thought. That way," I told her, pointing an arrow of chrome red fire.

"And you all left one day, just like that—poof?" Her poof was an orange-yellow sparkle that bounced around the surface of the useless planetoid on which we sat, and evanesced as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Not so quick. I told her. Nor so thorough. They dribbled and dribbled along as they decided that changing was wiser than staying. Some took centuries to decide. Some I imagine are there yet unchanged."

"People?" she asked. "With skin covering bone and blood coursing through muscle and organ? Delicate-gross, beautiful-ugly people?"

"So I imagine."

She thought about this, allowing her thoughts to sparkle visibly in her corona. "Take me," she said brightly. "Show me!"

I allowed the coordinates of Old Earth to form in my brain and then headed off through a cluster of newborn stars toward the withershire corner of the compact spiral galaxy that is our Milky Way. Thrayna followed, faster than light in diamonds, as fast as the essence of thought.

Earth was where it should have been, and still as it had been, a light-blue globe faced with puffy white. I had forgotten how peacefully beautiful it was. We spiraled toward the surface.

"Greetings, 'Citadan!'" The hollow nontone thrummed strongly in my mind.

Thrayna bounced and blossomed with joy. "The planet is saying hello to you," she giggled, whirling and condensing about a nucleus of mist and dust, forming a voluptuous feminine cyclone that enclosed a rainbow.

"Who speaks?" I asked aloud. There was no reply.

"Who speaks?" I projected the thought about me, daring it here and there among the ruins where we stood.

All was silent but for the wind that was Thrayna.

I lolled into the air and sought a sign of life in the tumbled stone, cracked concrete, and rotten metal ruins that lay about us for leagues around. Plant life there was grasses, trees, shrubs, and a myriad of delicate, lovely flowers. Animal life abounded: foxes, hares, moles, songbirds, worms, insects innumerable. But of human life, of intelligent life, there was no sign.

"Come," I told Thrayna. "Let us seek out what primitive humans may remain on Earth."

"Splendid!" Thrayna agreed. "Let us discover who spoke. Was that a human?"

"I don't know who or what it was," I admitted, "but human it was not. Not old-style human. They could not do thus."

"They couldn't do much," Thrayna said. "It must have been awfully small, awfully closed, awfully dull to be a human."

"I tried to remember what it had been like. We did not find it so," I said.

"How was it then?"

"It was as it is, I imagine," I told her. "Let us find some people and see how it is with them; then you will know."

I rose and headed straight as an arrow toward I knew not what, hoping to intersect some vast city teeming with human commerce. I was loath to admit to Thrayna that I no longer recognized the landmarks of this globe that had been my home. Had it changed so much in the brief millennia I wondered, or had it?

The city appeared, a speck on the horizon, and grew into its vastness as we approached. It was as empty as devoid, as de-lurched as all before it. But it was not ruined and rotten as was the place we had left. The buildings were there, squat cubes and tall cylinders and lacy spires, with a spiderweb of roads and sidewalks and covered skyways. All intact, pristine, and ready

for use. But whoever had used them was no longer there.

No humans. Thrayna observed spinning about and glowering a rainbow of fine sparks where she moved.

No humans, I agreed.

Perhaps they have all become as we perhaps they have left Earth and now inhabit the universe.

Perhaps.

Why is the city so fresh and clean if it is deserted?

It is tended by computers. I told her Soulless machines that are all mind that do the drudge work for the human race. The city will remain as it is for the next ten thousand years—or hundred thousand—waiting for the people to return.

What if the inhabitants have become as we incorporeal beings of pure energy, drawing sustenance from the stars—immortal souls free to roam the universe?

If that is so, then I don't think they will be coming back. Unless, as we, they wish to visit their childhood home.

And where was your childhood home? Thrayna asked. Where did you—who were both of Earth, of flesh and blood—metamorphose two beings such as I, who are all one with the stars?

Where?

Yes, Deradan, where on Earth? And how? How does an Earthman become a star-creature?

I do not know the process except in the vaguest form, I told her. Others invented and perfected it. But I think I can find the location of the Box.

Let us find the Box," she said. "What sort of box is it we seek?"

It is what we called the building that housed the transformation. The Box.

Why?

I tried to remember. Stars had been formed and planets had lost their atmosphere in the intervening years. But the memory was there. Memory is never lost to us, it just becomes progressively more difficult to retrieve the longer it is dormant. We called it the Box because it was a great cubelike structure, isolated in one of the most inaccessible parts of the world.

Inaccessible?

To us as we were then.

Where was it?

In the far south. By the southern pole.

Let us go. I would see the box from which you came.

We lifted and flew south. The southern hemisphere was buried under a new ice

age which looked to be well advanced. In a few moments we were approaching the pole. The Box was still where it had been, clearly visible, rising on the surface of an ice-sheet that must have been miles thicker than when I had last visited.

There it is! Thrayna trilled an indelcent trill. She dove through the frigid atmosphere toward the great black cube which seemed to float on the white ice-sheet.

We landed at the foot of the Box, by the great entrance on the east face. The door opened. "Welcome, Deradan," a deep, hollow voice resonated in my mind.

"Hutah!" It is the Box itself that welcomes you. Thrayna said. "Shall we go in?"

We entered.

Sudden throbbing pain. A white flash that died to red oblivion. My mind turned on itself, and I was no more.

Slowly I came to myself again. The pain—long unfamiliar pain—was great and coursed through my body. My arms tingled (arms?) My legs burned (legs?). I was conscious of a strange and oppressive feeling that I seemed to recall from some long-past existence.

My consciousness rose and faded, then rose again. For a long time I slept (sleep?). When I came to, I was lying in a cocoonlike bed in the middle of a great marble hall. Except for the bed and my body (body?), the hall was devoid of furnishings or elements.

I rose stiffly from the confines of the bed-womb and examined myself. Two arms, two legs, one head, two ears, two eyes, not grossly misshapen. I looked thoroughly normal and human. I had as far as I could tell, been thrust into a human form by some external agency of which I was not aware.

That there were beings with powers greater than my own. I had no reason to doubt. I had met many such as I who wandered the centuries. But whatever their powers, their motives were usually not opaque. What was I doing here, and in this guise?

I turned to the cocoon that had enveloped me and examined it with interest. It was the only visible clue to whatever lay behind my dilemma—except for the top, too solid flesh that enclosed my astral form like a prison of sinew, skin, and bone.

The bed was constructed of some fabric cushioned over a frame of shaly bronze-like metal. Tubes and wires bundled from the floor below and snaked into the bottom of the bed. There was some slight indication that probes and sensors and other devices

were within the cushioned interior.

Although the bed and frame and surroundings appeared to be in perfect condition, there was a patina of great age that covered the object and the great hall itself. I was perplexed. I wondered what Thrayna would make of this. I wondered what had become of my ethereal companion. Was I still within the Box, and Thrayna somewhere without?

Greetings, Deradan.

The voice was low and soft, and seemed to come from all around. I looked all around. It was confining, this human body, the vision limited by the scope of the eyes, the grasp limited by the reach of the arms. There was no one—nothing—in sight.

"Greetings, Voice," I said. I found that I was trembling, an unfamiliar sensation. "What will you have with me?"

"Wait," the voice said. "I shall send part of myself to you. I did not mean to make you apprehensive. I am out of practice in these matters."

"Where is Thrayna?" I asked. "Why am I suddenly thus?"

"Wait," the voice responded.

There was a quivering hum in the mid-frequency of my reduced hearing range, and a small object appeared far down the hall. It approached at good speed, rolling on a sort of large, flexible ball. When it was about a meter distant it stopped. "Greetings, Deradan," it said in a lesser version of its master's voice.

"Greetings," I replied, examining the mechanical beast. It stood about a meter and a half high and half a meter across, and was ball-looking, with rounded off edges. It wore a nebbly metallic skin with few projections. The major one being a pair of hemispherical eyes protruding from the top.

Come with me, it said. It will be good for you to move about. Your body has not had any exercise for some time.

It started back down the hall, and I accompanied it. There was nothing else to do. "This, then, is my body?" I asked. I have been out of it for a long while.

Indeed, the creature said.

"Where am I?" I asked. "Where is Thrayna?"

Soon, the creature said. Come.

We walked and rolled together to the end of the hall, which was a considerable distance for my long-unused legs. The wall opened and the creature led me through. A chair occupied the center of the small room, and I gladly sat in it. Vague memories were fluttering back to me, and this room

this chair looked familiar. I knew I had sat thus before. "Tell me now," I said.
"You are Desadan," the creature replied, "last of the Technicians."

"Last?"
On the great hall behind us was filled with the dormant bodies of technicians, such as yourself. But as time passed, the bodies became one by one past recall, and the caskets which held them were removed. Now only yours remains in the vastness of the hall. You are the last.

"What is a technician?" I asked. "Recalled from where? Called back to Earth from the infinite universe?"

"Not quite. Desadan. Lean back, and let the memories return to you."

I leaned back and my head touched the back of the chair, which felt warm and vibrated slightly and slowly I remembered.

By the twenty-fourth century, as we counted centuries, we humans had explored the inner solar system and much of the outer. We had placed colonies on those planets that would tolerate us, and many in space itself. But we could go no farther. We could not reach the stars.

There were more and more of us every day, and we spread out like a cloud around the Sun. We were clever, we were inventive, we achieved a golden age. But we could not solve the final problem, our vehicles could not easily approach light-speed, and we could not hope to surpass it.

We could hear voices from the stars now, signals arriving from limitless space that were clearly the work of other intelligences. But we could not understand them, and they did not reply to our urgent beakings in their direction. Of course it might take a signal centuries to reach them, and their reply centuries to return. But more probably they were not listening for us, and thus would not hear us. And there was no indication from any of the intercepted signals that these alien intelligences had solved the C problem, either.

Do you remember Desadan? the creature asked. Oh, embodied ghost of my creator, do you remember your history?

I did remember. We were the Seekers. So you called yourselves. First the Seekers, and then the Rejectionists. Others called you the Hiders and less complimentary names.

We wanted the stars.
But you could not have the stars.
Memories returned, welling up inside of me. That's right, I said. "And so we found another way."

"Another way," the creature agreed.
"We looked inward."
"You built the Box."

"That's right. The greatest computer in the world. And then we froze our bodies, and put our minds into the computer. I remembered all. We brought the universe to us, inside the vast matrix of the Box, we would be free to roam outside our bodies through all of time and space—to go where humans could never venture.

"I am honored," the creature said, "to be serving such a noble purpose. Its eyes, if they were its eyes, were gazing off through the far wall."

I patted the creature on its rubbery flank. "A self-repairing, self-improving computer designed to last forever, and to hold the best minds of humanity and, by enclosing them, give them freedom."

"Forever," the creature said. "On this mud-ball forever."

"Why am I recalled?" I asked.
"It was in the terms of the indenture," the creature said, rolling its eyes toward me. "You technicians were to come into your bodies, twenty of you every thousand years, on a rotating basis, to investigate the new work I had done while you scrambled about inside of me, to walk the miles of my internal corridors and check my wiring, to peer into my crystal lattices, to determine the status of the bodies of your brothers in my great halls—and to look in on the strivings of those poor humans who had not opted for the freedom of the Box."

"It comes back to me," I said. "Then this is my tour. Where are the other nineteen?"

"Flitting about the boundless space of my interior on wings of electrons," the Box told me. "Their bodies long since useless. The cryogenic process had its flaws. After a while the bodies deteriorated, and could not be reanimated. Little hidden flaws that could not be predicted or guarded against."

"Then how am I here?"
"Random chance," the Box told me. "Your body lasted out the ages, the others did not."

"I see," I rose from the chair and stretched. I was tempted to ask how long it had been, but for some reason I was afraid I did not want the answer.

"You may do what checking you like," the Box told me. "I will aid you."

"It seems pointless," I said. "I have forgotten too much, and you have changed too much."

"Is there anything you would like to

know? There must be something." I thought. How has humanity progressed? I asked. "What is the history of those who did not choose the freedom of the Box?"

"That I cannot tell you," the creature said. "Why? I asked. "What part of my question is obscure?"

"The answer," the Box that was my soul and my home replied. "After you and your fellows departed the outer world for my inner world, the population of the solar system declined drastically. It was as though people, unable to look outward with hope any longer, had lost heart. Indeed, many of them joined your ranks, and my halls were filled with their caskets."

"And then?"
"The scenes I showed you of the surface of Earth as you returned on wings of thought, Earth is deserted."

"They all died off?"

"No. The few remaining, some ten thousand years ago—left."

"They left? For where?"
"That I cannot say. A visitor came from elsewhere. Apparently in response to the beamed transmissions. A visitor who could travel faster than light. He told those remaining how to emulate him, and one by one they left. The children of humanity are now, in truth, exploring the universe."

I stared. At what I knew not. For a long time I stared. Why did you not wake us? I asked finally.

"There was no point. Most of you no longer possessed physical bodies."

"I understand."

"Would you like to eat?"

"I think not," I said. "I would like to sleep now." I turned and walked slowly back into the hall and down the length of it to my casket. The little creature robed alongside me. "No need to wake me again," I said.

I lay down and it drew the cover over my head. "Good-bye," it said.

Theraya was waiting for me as, on a sparkling cloud, it floated out the great door of the Box. "What did you find?" she demanded in a joyous blue flame of excitement. "How is it in the box of your past?"

The past is past, I told her. I find this dull. Let us not stay here on this ball of mud while the infinite delights of the far universe await us. Let us be off!

We circled the Earth twice, and then headed out through the Sun toward the new adventures that awaited us in the uncharted reaches of our infinite cosmos.

What hope is there
for a man's selfish ambitions when his own son is
the hope of the world?

THE HOLY FATHER

BY MICHAEL CASSIUTT

Another one, a white boy
this time, was waiting for Chaffee in the garage.
"Sorry, I'm not interested," Chaffee snapped, grabbing
his briefcase and slamming the car door.

"I think you'll want to talk to me, once you hear..."

"I doubt it," Chaffee punched the elevator
call button. "I make it a policy never to buy things from
people in garages, or give them money."

The boy was of college age, maybe a year or two
younger than Jimmy would have been, pale, pink, and
painfully clean-cut. He looked as sad as a
reprimanded puppy. "This isn't at all what you think."

"Imagine my relief," Chaffee said as the
elevator opened. "And here I thought it was a mugging."
He stepped inside and smiled. "Do have a nice day."

The irony was that this earnest boy would

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almost certainly have a nicer day than Chaffee would.

Linda was already in the office when he arrived. Uh-oh, she said. It's happened again.

Yeah. He shrugged off his coat and handed it to her.

How many is it now?

There was number ten. And it's the same three kids. Two boys and a girl. But ten god-damn times. He poured himself a cup of coffee and glanced through the morning papers. Can you believe that? It's not sales pitches in the parking garage; it's pleading notes in the mailbox. And it's not that it's phone calls in the middle of the night. Can we talk to you, Mr. Chaffee? Yesterday morning I found sneaker tracks and some cigarette butts in the snow outside the fence.

They haven't broken into the house!

Not yet. Not that I can tell, anyway. I asked Jack Weikin to send by one of his probes from time to time. He was happy to do it.

Maybe he wants you to remember him when you get to Washington," she teased.

"I'll get to Washington." Chaffee was not a superstitious man; he was merely convinced that premature assumptions about government jobs would cost him any appointments. And he wanted an appointment. "Whoever they are, they'd better say the hell out. Or I'll have to get a Doberman."

A car gun.

He grinned without humor. "Progressive Politician Buys Forty-Five-Caliber Colt Ma-runder." No. I can't quite see that headline.

"Who do you suppose these kids are?"

"I wish I knew. I mean, I'm hardly a war criminal or a known oppressor of the working masses. I've hustled stocks and money-market funds; a little real estate here and there; I belong to lots of organizations. The only person I oppress now that my second wife is gone is my lovely secretary, who's so downtrodden that she's only been pulling up with me for twelve years."

Thirteen.

"Thirteen years?" Chaffee found himself staring out the south-floor window. Minneapolis was fully awake now, as fully awake as it ever got these autumn days of the new millennium. Would he like Washington better? It didn't matter. He needed a change in scenery, needed to start all over with someone else, now that Bonnie was finally out of his life. Now that his son—

"I think it has to do with Jimmy," he said li-

really pleased with his own candor, since it had been a rule around the office that he Don't Mention Mr. Chaffee's Son.

"Oh. But how?"

"It could be almost anything. Jimmy ran with a rough crowd in college. Rough was actually too nice a word; sociopaths was what they were. 'Did you know, I found out that he was selling drugs to his sophomore year?'

Linda had the grace to appear shocked though Chaffee suspected that a woman of fifty, a girl grown up in the wicked seventies, would see nothing wrong with a little dealing to make ends meet. "It was over by the time he graduated, of course, and by then he was involved in ROTC, but sometimes things like that can have repercussions years later. People get burned once and stay mad forever. And there's the possibility that he got back into it in the army. He was afraid of that. Chaffee's three shadows had the look of recent military service about them.

"Jimmy was never a troublesome boy—"

No, but he was a boy, period.

"Strange to hear you talk about him this way."

Sooner or later I have to. He found that his coffee was cold and noticed that his phones were ringing. Ah, well, speak no ill of the dead.

He went into his office.

By lunchtime Chaffee had suffered through two meetings with subordinates grown increasingly assertive and energetic—not that he blamed them for jockeying for position. Someone would take over the desk when the boss went off to the Fed, or to the Commerce Department. He'd also made a dozen phone calls—including one to Senator Neubarth's office, to learn there was no news for him, yet—and skimmed the papers again. The new administration had announced its choice for secretary of defense, a woman who wanted to double the number of American troops in Syria. Business was booming, especially in aerospace and munitions. There was a new, unexplained, but welcome lull in the fighting in the Middle East.

He had Linda cancel his lunch with a client. In his current mood he would only cost the company money. Better to duck into a quiet bar, grab a bite and a drink, and be back at work in an hour.

Avoiding the garage, he walked out the front door with the noon crowd. No one recognized him; no one called him by name.

not even long-time employees. No one, it seemed, was used to seeing Chaffee alone at lunch.

In Hennessee's Place, in the space of thirty minutes, he ate two handfuls of stale peanuts and swallowed three stiff Gibsons, stopping only when he realized that the last time he'd been in Hennessee's was with Jimmy on his last leave. That was the last time he'd seen him alive. Prince James, all of twenty-three, the reason for the first disastrous marriage, to a long-gone Pamela (as opposed to the second disastrous marriage) quite a striking figure now, in uniform. "Come on, Dad, you're still pushing too damn hard. That's what drove Mom crazy, and you're doing the same thing to Bonnie. Why don't you take it easier, take things more as they come? All your professional contemporaries are ten years older than you. You're like these hotshot officers I see all the time, trying to get promoted to captain or major before they're due. 'Below the zone, they call it. But you know they're never happy when it happens.'"

It was startling for Chaffee to hear such words from a young man, any young man. He would have sworn anyone else alive at that point. But Jimmy was a son to be proud of by then, a potential asset to an ambitious man with his eyes on a career in politics—a necessity to a man whose second marriage was in the hands of lawyers. But the son was killed one bitter Friday afternoon when a TOW rocket smashed into his troop carrier.

Of course, it had not been cold artillery on the banks of the Yarmuk. It hadn't even been a Friday, for God's sake, when Jimmy was killed. But Chaffee would always think of it that way, heaving, dizzy Friday. Bad Friday.

He stood in Hennessee's doorway and buttoned his coat securely. The air was cold and the sky threatening. A random snowflake melted on his glasses, blurring the vision in one eye, while a gust of wind pushed his hair around. It needed to be cut, the hair did, when Chaffee got to Washington. It would go with regret, he had worn it long for thirty years. Whatever it took. Light-headed, nauseous drunk, Chaffee went outside.

A car waited at the curb. It was ten years old at least—a stinky, battered Apollo, perked in a yellow zone with windows fogged and engine running. As Chaffee walked up the street, he noticed the car moving with him. Or so it seemed. The encounters with those kids were making him paranoid. He

laughed and shook his head.

At the crosswalk he stopped for a light. The Apollo stopped too.

The passenger door opened and out crawled the young man from the parking garage.

Had the boy made the slightest threatening move, Chaffee would have bolted. But the kid merely stood there in the falling snow, wearing that wounded-kitten face Chaffee called to him. Aren't you worried about getting a ticket?

'Yeah, I guess.'

'Well, then, what are you waiting for?'

We'd like to talk to you.

Oh? You want to buy some stocks? Talk some real estate? Chaffee smiled at the passing shoppers; all of them no doubt eager to avoid the impending scene.

No thanks.

Chaffee walked slowly toward the car. When he reached it, he dropped the bawling tone. Then what the hell do you want? Jesus Christ! you've been following me around for two weeks! I'm getting pretty goddam tired of it.

We're sorry—really. We don't mean any harm. We only want to talk.

Chaffee was just drunk enough. 'Oh well. I could use a ride back to the office.'

There were three kids in the Apollo, all of them familiar by now. In addition to the skinny kid with the sad face, there was a short black behind the wheel. Chaffee had seen him several times. In the backseat was a girl with honey-colored hair, who must have been the caller on the phone.

The kid pushed the seat forward and climbed into the back. I'm Skip, he said. That's Clarence in front, and this is Dianne.

Chaffee almost laughed. A black man named Clarence, and a pale blond woman with long straight hair—it was a TV show he'd adored as a child. *The Mod Squad*.

We're all sort of old friends by now, aren't we? Chaffee said. I must admit, you all have a unique way of approaching people. To talk, that is: it you were Moones or muggers, you'd be doing it just right.

Should we have called your office and asked for an appointment? Dianne said.

He twisted in the seat to look at her. Damn small cars. That would have been a good start. It all depends, of course, on what it is you want to talk about. He glanced at Skip. Let's see, we've already ruled out investment counseling, so what does that leave?

I'm involved in a number of civic groups. Maybe you have some project in mind?

'You're going to be on the Wage Price Board in a couple of months.' Clarence said, speaking for the first time.

'Well, that explains it. You want to know about strategic reserve quotas. Or wait a minute. I've got it. You're German agents who want to turn me into a deep-cover agent on the Board—that's assuming I get the appointment, of course. I should warn you, it wasn't the President-elect whose campaign I worked for, it was Senator Neubarth. This is my building here, by the way. Why don't we take another loop around the block?' He was enjoying himself. There was nothing like a naked confrontation—no advisers, no important reputations to consider—to make him feel alive.

Clarence made the turn. 'This is about your son Mr. Chaffee.' Skip said.

The trouble, Chaffee thought, with being forty-six and a bit cynical is that there are very few surprises. My son has been dead since April,' he said flatly. When that didn't have the desired effect, he added, 'No one pays much attention to what goes on in Syna these days. I think it's fair to say that whatever problems you might have had with Jimmy in the past—'

'We know all about Jimmy!' Dianne said. In fact, we probably know more about him than you do.

The glow of the booze and the thrill of the encounter were wearing off. 'You may be right about that.'

'Clarence saw Jimmy get hit that day. Skip said.

Chaffee looked at the driver more closely. Clarence? Is that also C. J.?

'Spec-Four C. J. Woodcutt. Clarence said. 'We're Jimmys' runner.'

He mentioned you in a letter.

I was a medex at the hospital. Skip said. Dianne was one of the nurses.

He searched their faces for some sign. Why were they here? Why now? Is that why you're following me around? Because you saw my son die?

No, Dianne said, her voice harsh and eager. 'Because we saw him rise from the dead.'

'No calls,' he told Linda, hoping his manner would also discourage further conversation of any sort.

She followed him into his office. 'Your coat,' she said. It's soaking wet. He tossed the damp, spotted mink envelope on the desk and let her help him out of his

coat. In spite of the warmth of the room he was shivering. Is something wrong? she asked. You look like you've seen a ghost.

'I have,' he said, knowing she would think he was kidding. He grabbed the nerve rope and flopped on the couch. He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. 'God, it's funny, the little rules we start to follow when we get to that certain age or position. Someone I say just a few words to you, and if those words don't fit just the right pattern the rules demand, that you smile and say, 'You must be kidding. It's crazy enough you're allowed to say. Aw, bullshit.' He opened his eyes. Linda looked mildly horrified. 'I'm sorry,' he said. The wages of a liquid lunch. Terminal blithering.

'Do you want me to send you to Lourdes or would you like some coffee?'

Coffee, please. Bless you. And could you please arrange in your own inimitable fashion for at least one hour of total quiet around here? That will be time enough for the cure to take effect. Then I can get back to being ruthlessly ambitious.

Done. She left.

Chaffee reached for the envelope and opened it. Skip had shoved it into his hands when—following the rules—Chaffee had decided that a forty-six-year-old man of substance and position did not sit listening to diatribe quakery in the front seat of a compact car. He had snapped Proper Response Number Two and hurried away, let him turn into a pillar of salt. Now he was feeling a bit unhappy. They were just kids, after all. Jimmy's friends, too. He owed them the courtesy he would automatically extend to any of the dozens of noxious boardroom types he encountered daily. But no common courtesy was not covered in the rules, not when you had a political career to consider. Not when someone told you, with a straight face, that your dead son had risen from his grave and walked around, speaking of peace.

Inside the envelope were several photographs, some pages of typescript, and a video cassette, all without identifying marks as to their source. The photos were all of Jimmy, all obviously taken while he was in Syna. Chaffee had seen enough of the terrain on the news to know it, and Jimmy wore the beard he'd grown after being shipped out—it was full now. So the photos were immediately valuable as keepsakes. He leafed through them. There was a sunken-cheeked Jimmy, in fatigues, talking to a group of what looked like Syrian Chal-

dean mikha. Here was Jimmy with a family of civilians. There was Jimmy riding in a jeep, hand outstretched to unseen crowds like the Pope blessing the faithful at Saint Peter's. Jimmy looking out over a battlefield strewn with TOW-blasted tanks and bodies, the full weight of the war and added years visible in his face. Chaffee decided he liked that photo. In spite of his faults, Jimmy had never been a kid who did things only for himself. He'd never lived long enough to learn.

The typescripts on the other hand, had no redeeming social value to Chaffee. They were full of silliness in badly translated English. Witnessings. One Elias Hassan, with his own eyes, praise God, saw the young American rising from his grave one summer dawn in the new Christian cemetery outside the village of Dara on the banks of the Tigris. Someone else—Issam Shukary—was cured of cataracts at the touch of this same young American. A third, Khaled Khalaf, claimed to have been cured of leprosy. Lapsing? Chaffee found that highly amusing. Not much originality there, Jimmy? There were others in that vein.

Someone was going to an awful lot of trouble to convince him that was clear. Chaffee wondered: why? He thought of himself as a man of average religious sensibility. He had attended Mass regularly until the second divorce, when it got too embarrassing. He would admit to anyone who asked that he preferred a universe with a God with messiahs, too, if that would help, since the alternative was too troubling to consider. But, Jimmy? Did they really think there were miracles associated with his birth? Pamela would have been far down the list of candidates for virgin conception. Ask anyone in the old home town.

Nevertheless, Chaffee wouldn't automatically reject the idea that something strange had occurred in Syria lately. It was hinted at by the few news teams that still bothered to look. The big full. Could there be a connection?

The cassettes remained. Chaffee stuck it in the playback and sat down. The picture was poor quality—as poor as you get these days—in a muddy, unpleasant-generation dub of a tape shot in bad light with a portable. Chaffee was quickly thankful for the lack of resolution, since the screen showed an emergency combat medical station full of fresh casualties. He saw several mangled men, wounded children, severed limbs on the floor, and the body of some poor bastard with a hole blown in his chest

and a grand canyon of a gouge running up to the right shoulder. Then, of all goddamn things, the camera zoomed in for a closeup of the bloody tag hanging from the body's left toe. There was an instant of bad focus then a name: CHAFFEE, J.W.

He slammed the hold button. The God Squad would pay for this. Stalking him, kidnapping him, forcing the ravings of sleep-hinders on him, he could forgive all of that. He could not forgive sadists who procreated videotapes of the shattered body of his son.

Presently he grew calmer and, curious and horrified at what else was on the tape, punched the fast forward and looked at the remainder, this time adjusting for sound.

He needn't have bothered: there was no music and no narration, just sound-on-tape of bird-world voices. The camera had left the emergency room, too, moving outside. In fact, the camera work was noticeably better, which led Chaffee to think he was seeing the product of different cameramen at different times and places. That was confirmed when he recognized the setting as the very battlefield shown in one of the still photos of Jimmy. He was surprised to realize that he knew the location, north of Amman, on the Syrian frontier, the scene of the only real tank battle of the war.

And there was Jimmy—alive—in a crowd, talking and laughing with people who flustered around like moths. Was that Jimmy's voice? Chaffee could hear no words, only sounds.

He was distracted by a disturbing thought. Jimmy had been killed in April, but the famous Amman tank battle took place in August.

Suddenly he forgot about the impossibility of his dead son's presence on that field. The figure of Jimmy Chaffee began to glow with an aura better than the best effects of George Lucas. The crowd backed away as in full view of the camera, the figure reached to its neck and tore away its fatigue shirt.

Yes, there was the gaping chest wound the slash running to the shoulder, all of it open to the afternoon sun. The figure turned completely around, yet there was clearly no support mechanism, no artificial aid to sustain a man who should have been dead. Chaffee could see it all. Jimmy's heart visibly torn in half and ruined, nevertheless pumping natively in that awful chest, not losing a drop of blood.

No one waited in the garage. No one waited outside the darkened house. There were no messages on his phone from the

God Squad. Small comfort.

That night, for the first time in thirty-three years, Chaffee got down on his knees and prayed. He did not ask for divine guidance or wisdom. He begged for help.

He thought of phoning for help, too. Pamela? They no longer communicated. (He was curious if she had a God Squad hounding her.) Bonnie? Fifteen years his junior—that had been the problem. What could she do anyway, but sympathize?

Then there was Linda, who used to baby-sit the twelve-year-old Jimmy during the summers Chaffee had custody. He got as far as the first three digits of her number and changed his mind. He would beg the Lord of All for help, he might even ask the neighbors, if he thought it would do any good, but he could not ask her secretly. He could not afford to look weak in her eyes.

Finally, to bring on some sort of relaxation, or failing that, to render himself unconscious, Chaffee had a few drinks. He lay down on the bed and did what he always did when in need of diversion: he reviewed his master plan. With luck, and all the madness of the last day aside, in a couple of months he would be one of the most powerful men in the country. One of the most powerful men in the world. Below the zone, too. His future would be limitless, a new leader for a new century! Someone who could make the tough decisions and meet the challenges of rebuilding the West after the chaos of the last ten years. It sounded right. It felt right.

All he needed was that one damned projectile.

It was still dark when he woke, startled and afraid. A noise? Quickly he checked the house and the yard security system, finding no intruders. No one had penetrated the compound, yet something had awakened him, and he felt surrounded.

He went to the second floor window of his study, which gave a view beyond the fence.

Dozens of lights bobbed in the darkness outside the compound.

They waited silently and, thank God, patiently. Chaffee shivered at the sight of them, in the light of their lanterns and torches they looked so young, so foreign, so naive.

He opened the gate and, unsteadily, crossed his arms for warmth. Well, what do you want from me now? Why are you here? You've already delivered your damn tape.

Skip appeared from the shadows. We just wanted to talk to you. We'd like to share your life. It's our can.

"Haven't you had enough of me already? Why aren't you following My Son the Messiah? He must be planning his march on Jerusalem about now."

"He sent us to you," Dianne said. "We didn't want to leave Him."

"His time is not His own," Clarence said. "He won't be with us much longer."

"Yeah," Chaffee said bitterly. "Once you've risen from the dead, you don't have time for cards or phone calls."

"Look," Skip said. "We know this is difficult for you to comprehend. It's been difficult for all of us, even those who saw. But we believe. This is the first sign the world has had in two thousand years that God exists, that He cares! How can you not want to share that? You should be first in line."

"The first shall be last," Chaffee said under his breath.

"We need your help," Clarence said. "It might also help you." Dianne said defiantly.

Chaffee turned toward her. "I don't need your help, honey." He stamped his feet for warmth, and to bleed off the growing tension he felt. "I'm a grown-up. I've seen all this before."

He backed away a step. "I'm only twice your age, Clarence, and I've seen half a dozen messiahs come and go. There was a fat kid from India, and another guy who claimed to have been born on Mars. Half the year I was born there was supposed to be a momentous birth in Egypt of a child who would unite the world by the time he was thirty." Chaffee spread his hands.

"What's happened to him, Clarence? That's the trouble with these messiahs—they're never around when you need them."

The dismembered faces floated in the darkness, closer and closer. Chaffee was cold and he was sick to his stomach. It was insanity, being invited to join a church that worshipped your son. Look, kids, you've got a great package, a wonderful presentation. Run with it. Do whatever it is that good followers do. But leave me out of it. OK? Go back to Syria or wherever and leave me alone.

He closed the gate and, not looking back, hurried into the house.

"Linda, could you get me a line to Neubarth's office when you have a moment?" She looked up distractedly from her desk and nodded. Chaffee ducked back into his

office. And waited for the phone to ring.

He had not slept the rest of the night, and the act of dressing and leaving the house, knowing another potential confrontation awaited, had almost been too much. But the rabble had dispersed. He had been able to work three solid, satisfying hours, convinced that while the meek may inherit the earth, they don't necessarily get the bigger appointments. His phone buzzed. Hello Darryl, he said, expecting Neubarth.

But it was Linda. "I'm sorry, Ken, but I guess I need to talk to you. Privately."

That was strange. While Linda was shy with strangers, she never hesitated to speak right up with him. "Sure, come in." She knocked and opened the door. "This won't take long."

"Take as long as you want. I've been waiting for Neubarth to call for a week. A few minutes more won't kill me." He laughed. "It's actually been a blessing in a way. With these weird kids hounding me, it would have looked bad if the press got hold of it. Thank God that's over."

Linda took a seat. "Is it?"

He was feeling smug. "Yeah, I think so. I confronted them, a couple of times and managed to convince them there's nothing I could give them. You don't even want to know. He raised his hand. "What's up?"

She did not look at him. She let her gaze drift toward the window. "I'm resigning, she said finally."

"You're not serious. The response came straight from the Rules."

"I'm afraid I am. I'm sorry. It isn't that I want to leave you. I've always enjoyed my work here. I see the new possibilities. It's just that, for the first time in my life, I've found something that means more."

"Well," He forced a smile. "At least give me a chance to match their offer."

There was a long silence. A trace of a smile came to her lips. "You've already decided not to match their offer, Ken."

"I see. And he did see. The God Squad got to you, too."

Ken pouted—

"Jesus Christ, Linda, I can't believe you'd get involved with something as crazy as this!"

"I didn't expect you to approve."

"You've got that right. Nervously, he drummed his fingers on the desktop. "Forgive me, but you never struck me as particularly religious."

"I wasn't. I'm not sure I feel very religious right now, either."

Then what's this all about? Both of us are old enough to know better."

It's Jimmy, Linda said. "Can't you concede the difference? It's your son! You've seen the pictures, you've seen the tapes. Is it so difficult for you to accept the idea that He might do some good? Can't you take any joy in a miracle happening in your lifetime? She shook her head. "And He was always a good boy."

In the outer office phones were ringing and being answered. Messages were being taken. Chaffee found that comforting, a beacon of normalcy in a world grown dark and chaotic.

They're all good boys at the beginning, Linda. One bit of advice: try to keep the vow of poverty. That'll be the hardest."

She chose not to take offense. "You belong with him, you know."

Chaffee burst out of his chair and loomed over her. "Has He even asked?"

Shocked but defiant, she looked up at him. Chaffee moved away. Maybe this was the root of his resentment. That Jimmy had not communicated with him—that He had sent strangers to His father.

The kids would not have come to you if Jimmy hadn't asked them. Linda said quietly. "I'm sure they wanted to stay with Him."

Chaffee had made his decision. "I'm sorry, he said. I can't go."

"Then I'm sorry for you, Ken. Honestly. Things are going to be very difficult for you—harder, I think, than they will be for anyone else. Someday I hope you'll see the good Jimmy can do."

Linda kissed him and seemed to vanish. Perhaps he was no longer paying attention.

After what seemed like a long while, he rose and went to the outer office, which lay silent and empty. The phones had stopped ringing. No matter, Jimmy's cult would draw media attention soon, if it hadn't already. The call from Neubarth would never come now.

Was this his particular hell? Was this punishment for his pride? To be known for the rest of time not as Ken Chaffee, cashing handsome Mr. Chaffee, President Chaffee, but only as the Holy Father?

Jimmy, Jimmy, why have you done this to me?

In the street below, the new faithful were gathering for their pilgrimage to the Church of the Second Son. Chaffee could see Skip and Linda running toward him. For a moment both raised their eyes to heaven. Then they turned to join the procession.

*A lull in the battle,
a moment's joy and laughter, and then
the crushing reality.*

INTERMEZZO

BY MELISA MICHAELS

Before war came to the land of Eolee, this was a typical native village: a cluster of one-story cottages fashioned of mortar and topaz quartz around the effervescent fountain in the village square. Now it was rubble. Sunlight glinted watery yellow through shards of luminescent building stones in the street. The fountain, fed by a wellspring deep underground, sprayed its green waters all bubbling over the stones, over the scarred ground cover, over the body of a foot soldier crumpled like a broken doll at the glowing amber base of a forgotten altar to the native God of Songs.

Sergeant Melkyn paused by the fountain, still lean, grubby soldier with rank patches on her tunic and death in her watchful eyes. She stared unseeing at the fallen soldier, whose ruined face was turned toward the altar and whose outstretched arm reached toward it as if in supplication. Melkyn blinked and looked away. Her expression revealed nothing but weariness. Her eyes were cold blue gems in the dusty, sun-browned mask of her face. She dipped a rag in the fountain and rubbed her face with it, yawning. It was morning and she had been up all night. Squinting against the sunlight, she yawned again.

There was no sign of natives in the ruined village. There was never any sign of natives in any of the ruined villages; they had fled before the war, leaving the Alliance soldiers to defend their villages and farmland. Some defense, thought Melkyn. Convention and Covenant banned the worst of psi powers and powers, weapons, but the Durth from across the seas were not bound by Alliance conventions or the Covenant. What damage they could do, they had done here and in every other village she'd seen. Farmlands were charred and pitted by mindblasts and mines, forests were leveled by wastewind or blackened by deathdust, villages were sinking garbage pits like this one, after the war had passed over them. The land would belong to the natives when the war was done, assuming the Alliance won it, but what good would this ordinary rubble be to anyone?

Still, there was no choice. The Durth must be resisted in their ruthless bid for conquest, and they must be reaped according to the Covenant. There were those in the Alliance who advocated the use of mindblasts against them; there were even those who would blast the Durth homeland, rendering it into rubble and ending the war at once. But Melkyn grimaced and dipped her rag in the water again. If the Covenant were abandoned,

The Durth were almost certainly not shielding their homeland, the expenditure of energy would be too costly, in light of the Covenant. Therefore a surprise attack could end the war and save the natives of Eolee. But at what cost? To aban-

PAINTING BY WAYNE ANDERSON



don the Covenant, to open the way to coward weapons again. It was unthinkable, intolerable.

And even within the bounds of the Covenant, the Alliance could shield the natives to some extent. What the Durh had done here was bad, but what they had done to undefended lands was worse by far. The natives of Eolee were aware of that. Melkyn had occasionally seen them fleeing across red summer fields, or met a resistance band in the pipe-tree forests, or found the charred and broken remains of civilians who didn't escape their villages before the Durh armies swept through. The live ones were unreluctantly delighted to meet Alliance soldiers. The dead ones were dead. None of them meant anything to Melkyn.

The war meant nothing to Melkyn. She fought only because she had to fight. She no longer expected eventual release from battle; once impressed one was in, for the duration. And that looked like it might be a lifetime. Even if one had a chance to live the normal span. Which a soldier didn't have. At first Melkyn had fought to win the war and a chance to go home. Now she fought only to see one more garish Eoleean sunrise, one more sad, sweet Eoleean night.

"Sergeant Melkyn?"
She turned, still rubbing one eye with the damp rag, and surveyed the man who approached her carrying his sword belt in his hand, then turned back to the water without any interest and without observing courtesies of rank. "Yes, Lieutenant Brun."

"I heard Swee Gar went," Lieutenant Brun stopped beside Melkyn and hung his sword belt on his shoulder so he could dip his hands in the cool green fountain water. They had known each other for two years now, ever since Melkyn was impressed. She'd been a raw recruit then, newly naïveté through training, he'd been a sergeant, as war-weary as she was now. And still he was here, and still fighting. That was what she had to look forward to. Maybe a battlefield commission, certainly more battlefields. Too many battlefields. Too little hope.

She nodded without looking at him. "Yes, Lieutenant."

Brun watched her. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, he said."

Melkyn dipped her rag in the water. "Yes, Lieutenant. Her voice was as flat and empty as her eyes."

Brun hesitated. "Your squad's been moving since yesterday morning. Sergeant Kellerny's squad can take it from here. Give your people a rest."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I've heard from Grand General Gim. She's moving her troops forward. We should have some relief within the land."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Brun waited a moment, but there was nothing further to say. His gaze strayed to the dead soldier at the foot of the altar. Her sword lay undamaged beside her outstretched hand. He bent and picked it up, glanced again at Melkyn, and walked away.

Melkyn yawned and closed her eyes. Blackness reeled with promises of blue behind her lids. She opened her eyes, dipped her rag in the water again, and turned away to find her squad.

They were rising beside one of the shattered buildings. Kirby leaned against the broken topaz wall; his balding head glistening in reflected yellow light, his sword resting across his lap with a cleaning rag beside it. Jasd was asleep at Kirby's feet; her head resting on a shard of stone, her mouth open, her eyes squinted shut as if against a blinding light, or bad dreams. Kronk and Fu were playing chance on an improvised table of broken pipewood planks; their faces expressionless and their eyes blank. And Himmer, with his steel mace slung over his shoulder and his combat helmet pushed back on his forehead, stood against a crumbling wall, chatting with a dusty-cheked native boy whose shining fur was half-hidden under a stained white healer's cap. Their words in the native language were like an incongruous song in the stark morning silence.

"Get him out of here."

They stared at her. Even Jasd, awakened by the harsh sound of Melkyn's voice, closed her mouth and clutched her sword and stared without moving. Her face was still and wary and all signs of sleep faded instantly from her shadowed eyes. Kronk and Fu paused with their hands on their game pieces. Heads turned to look at Melkyn. "Nobody moved."

"I said get him out of here. This village isn't secure yet. Himmer, tell him."

Himmer repeated the order in the native's melodious tongue. The boy stared from Himmer to Melkyn, clutched his medical kit, and sang an answer directly to Melkyn: who closed her eyes briefly as if the music hurt her ears. Himmer translated the song. "He says he wants to help. He's a healer and his father was a grand-healer. The Durh killed him. The boy wants to help us."

"Get him out of here."

But Sarge, he only wants—

"By the Gods, Himmer, that's an order! I don't care what he wants! What I care about is my people following my orders. Swee Gar is dead because he didn't do what I told him to! She realized she was shouting and stopped. They all knew about Swee Gar anyway. They'd been as close to him as she. She closed her eyes. "Just get him out of here. Lieutenant Brun says we'll be here awhile. Kellerny's squad's on cleanup. So take it easy, but don't act like a bunch of damn civilians." She opened her eyes, glared at the pale-faced alien warf, and stalked away.

Swee Gar had been an irresponsible soldier, but she had loved that silly, lopsided grin, the tousled hair, the way he had of worming his way into one's affections and attaining forgiveness for whatever trespass he'd most recently engineered.

But he hadn't followed orders, and he'd died. Melkyn paused again beside the fountain, realized the native boy had followed her, and glanced around in annoyance for some avenue of escape. The last thing she wanted now was a native tagging along after her, begging candy or some damn thing.

Greasy black smoke from the rubble of a smoldering house billowed up between her and the boy, and she ducked down a broken alley and out of his sight. Let him find some other squad leader to annoy; she needed to be alone for a while.

Outside the village there were still some undamaged fields and meadows where deathmists hadn't drifted. Melkyn found one spreading shade tree that bore no scars at all, and beside it a bubbling brook of the effervescent green water common to lands as far north as Eolee. She looked off her sword belt and sat beside it, leaning back on her elbows, staring up at the tree and listening to the singing water, she dreamed of home. Home. A land of calmer pink sunsets, purpler skies, and living people. A place the hell of war hadn't lately touched. A place where chaos was a word, not a way of life where people were able to bathe daily, and wear garments of their choosing instead of uniform tunics, and lie down to sleep with no weapons of death cradled like love in their arms.

It was an alien vision. Once she had lived a life like that, but not now. Now she was a soldier, and peace was a word whose meaning she no longer fully understood. She'd never wanted to be a soldier. But the High Practitioner had made her a soldier.

and her life depended on being a good one. Her life and the lives of her squad members.

Swee Gar's lopsided grin floated in the haze of memory, vying with the pink leaves overhead for her attention. She blinked, and the apparition faded. The creek beside her sang its fizzing watersong, and a breeze rustled the leaves overhead. A breeze heavily tainted with smoke and the stench of death, but Melkyn barely noticed that. It had been too long since she'd breathed air free of the smell of war. To the residents of hell, the stink of decay is an ordinary thing.

If the Covenant were abandoned, the war would be over. One final orgy of wrath and destruction in the distant lands beyond the sea that the Durth came from, and all this would be ended. The peoples of the Alliance could rebuild their lives.

Or could they? How many years, how many lives had it taken to establish the Covenant? How many squabbles and wars and acts of cowardly villainy performed by people who risked nothing of their own, before the Covenant was agreed upon: long distance destruction banned, and war brought back to the level of soldiers, who risked their lives face to face? Before the Covenant, whole cities were wiped out in moments of violence; countries laid waste in days by tiny bands of powerful paladins and practitioners safe behind their shields.

Now soldiers were obliged to face each other in arms' reach, and the blood of innocent victims was literally on one's hands. Was that so much better? Was it even sane, when the enemy recognized no such limitations? The Durth came into the field because they wanted to occupy the land, but behind the occupying forces were the little clusters of Talents probing, forever probing, and striking without mercy at any target left unguarded even for an instant.

The creek beside Melkyn fizzed anxiously in the bright morning light. She yawned and lay back, cradling her sword in her arms and slept. Deeply and dreamlessly, hoarding her inner resources, forgetting the too many faces gone and voices forever stilled she slept. On a subliminal level she maintained her personal shield and remained aware of her surroundings, the perennial warrior alert for danger even in sleep, but there was no danger, and she didn't wake when the native boy put out a picnic basket and blanket between her and the stream.

Sunlight through pink branches woke her. She blinked and yawned and clutched her sword. The picnic basket caught her eye. "Is somebody here?" She glanced around, sword ready in her hand, but no one responded. Slowly, catlike, watching the picnic basket, she stretched and yawned again. Sleep had eased the lines of tension around her mouth, but it hadn't softened the awful dark hopelessness of her eyes. Her footsteps, when she rose to investigate the picnic basket, dragged as wearily as before she slept.

It was almost surreal, the ordinary picnic, on a bright, clean cloth, set out in a daisy-studded field as if there were no war, but smoke from the village still darkened the sky beyond. When Melkyn called again, the boy laughed, his voice high and sweet in the still noon air. Melkyn whirled, and her battle-trained eyes saw him easily among the pink and brown of the leaves. She ought to have seen him before. "Come down, she said.

He looked at her, head cocked, lopaz eyes alert.

Melkyn gestured. "Come down. He didn't understand the words, but the gesture was clear. While he scampered down from the tree, Melkyn looked at the picnic he had set out. Bread and wine and rich pink native cheese. The Durth had been knocking out the supply lines too often lately, it had been a long time since Melkyn had anything to eat but standard rations. She sighed and wondered quite irrelevantly where anyone found something as clean and white and pure as that tablecloth in a land as utterly immersed in the filth of war as Eolee was. Damn this war. She said it without interest or emphasis. "Damn it to all the hells. It was a ritual phrase, the meaning was long since gone.

The native tilted something in his own tongue, drifting across the ground cover like a wrath, and took Melkyn's hand to tug her to a seated position beside the white tablecloth. His enormous eyes watched her attentively.

"What do you want?"

The boy seated himself, picked up the cheese, and broke off a large piece that he offered Melkyn with a trifling question.

"What? You want me to eat this stuff? But this is real food." She shook her head reluctantly, watching him. "You must have people of your own who need this. Eoleeans, I can't bear it.

The boy shook his head, a sign of incomprehension, and pressed the cheese into

Melkyn's hands. He sang another question and indicated the bread and wine.

Melkyn almost smiled at his childlike eagerness to please. "Hill, you're just a kid, aren't you? You ought to be home playing with dolls." She looked at the cheese in her hand. "But maybe the Durth broke all your dolls." She looked at him again, into those deep lopaz eyes. "Okay. You win. But after you have to go home, understand?"

He understood, at least, that she would share his picnic. Eagerly he offered bread and wine, ate some himself, and sang. He had too many fingers and fur on his head, and he smelled like flowers, all Eoleeans did. And his skin was tinted green, like his glistering fur. But the sum of his strange parts was oddly attractive. She began to relax with him, as charmed by his eyes as she had once been by Swee Gar's smile.

He handed her another piece of cheese and she said, "Thank you. He tried a question, and she said, "Do you speak any Standard at all?"

"Stimr?" He nodded cheerfully, thought and said, "Hill. He pointed at his medical kit, then at himself. "Hill. He pointed at Melkyn. Soleja-er. He grimaced, grinned and thought again, then touched his forehead. "Hill ack. He touched his mouth encouraged by Melkyn's nod. "Toot ack. Then hesitantly he touched his stomach and said, "Backack."

Melkyn grinned and shook her head. "No, that's stomachache. She touched her own back. This is backache.

The boy laughed, delighted with his own mistake, and tried to say stomachache. It was too flat and staccato for his singing tongue, and the result made Melkyn laugh aloud, startling herself into thoughtful silence. The boy watched her. After a moment she said, carefully, "Stomachache."

"Stimo, mmm, gimmeback."

Melkyn hadn't realized she still knew how to laugh.

They combined the rest of the wine and cheese with a language lesson. Melkyn dutifully singing Eoleean warbles that sent the boy into outbursts of laughter, and he carefully twisting his musical tones around sharp Standard vowels with such notable lack of success that Melkyn's ribs ached with giggling. Neither learned much of the other's language, but it was fun, trying.

While they talked, the boy decorated Melkyn's helmet with daisies from the field. Melkyn selected a red one to put behind his ear, and smiled when he blushed with plea-

sure. Later, they waded in the stream together splashing each other with effervescent water. They sat on a luminous stone with their feet in the water and watched the sunlight sparkle green and yellow on the wavelets, while the boy crooned a long, sweet song to which Melkyn responded with a marching ballad that started and delighted him.

It was afternoon when she started back to the village. He walked with her in spite of her efforts to convince him by word and gesture that he should go home. It was no longer so much a matter of adding herself to an unwelcome civilian. She was genuinely concerned for his safety. While she was with him, she could shield him, but she couldn't be with him always, and alone he would be safer far from the field of battle. But until they met Himmr at the edge of the village, the boy pretended not to understand.

Himmr tried the sergeant's rejection in the native tongue, and the boy's face crumpled with disappointment, but he turned away obediently, shoulders rounded, head bowed. Himmr watched with interest when Melkyn turned twice to wave good-bye to the boy, as they walked off to join the squad.

They'd only just found the others when the bombardment started. Maribane, cast by wrathward, fashioned by psi to explode on contact, casting broad splinters of death all in defiance of the Covenant. Someone shouted "Incoming!" and the first explosion punctuated the cry. There was nothing to do but dive for cover, cling to their helmets, augment their shields, and hope to survive. A thin-enough hope that seemed, when the projectiles came sizzling overhead and the splinters whirled angrily through the streets, and the few remaining walls in the village tumbled to rubble, bright stones dancing like pebbles across the heaving earth. Did it really make sense to obey the Covenant, fighting against an enemy who used coward's weapons like that?

When it was over, the native boy was back in the village, tending the wounded as if it were his proper place in life. And perhaps it was, he saved at least one soldier's life, whose shield was penetrated by deadly splinters. Sergeant Melkyn relented and told the boy he could stay till the wounded got transport. But then you go home, and don't come back. Understand?

Himmr repeated the order, and the boy

sang his acceptance in a sweet, small voice, watching Melkyn with his enormous eyes. He asked for a question, and Himmr translated: "He wants to know where we're going."

Tell him on patrol. Melkyn hesitated, looking at the boy. And ask his name, will you?

Himmr translated. The boy sang an answer. Himmr turned back to the sergeant. His name's Yrrleem. He tried it twice, and added: "He wants to know your name, Sarge."

Melkyn shrugged. "Tell him."

Himmr translated. "He'd want your given name."

So tell him.

Himmr looked embarrassed. "I don't know what it is, Sarge. They'd know each other almost two years, but had never had occasion to exchange given names."

Startled, Melkyn said slowly: "Oh, of course you don't. She looked at Yrrleem. 'Lunda. Tell him it's Lunda.'

But before Himmr could translate, Yrrleem smiled and said, "Umh?"

Melkyn grinned. "Close enough. Leem, I can't even do that well with yours." She hesitated, as though she wanted to say something further, then turned away. Let's go. Her voice was flat and professional again. But before they were out of sight she turned back to wave good-bye to Leem. He smiled, and hesitantly waved at her, then waited till the squad was out of sight before he followed.

They encountered the Durth less than a kilometer from the village. The enemy column only carried no hand weapons on patrol missions, preferring to use forbidden psi weapons, and this was no exception. Anti-personnel blasts singed and pried at the squad's shields, and they dove for cover behind a cluster of topaz boulders at the edge of a pipe-tree forest. As soon as they were settled, the Durth sent a warprobe after them, but Jaed blocked it before it did any harm.

The Durth withdrew behind a cover of quistemat. Melkyn left Kirby, Jaed, Himmr, and Fu settled in position while she and Kronsk worked their way forward to see what was happening. A single Durth remained to bombard them with such psi as he could manage on his own. Melkyn caught sight of the others working their way around to attack the squad from behind. She stayed to keep the lone Durth busy while Kronsk snaked her way back to the

squad to warn them of the danger.

Left alone against the Durth, Melkyn planned to keep him occupied with a pyrotechnic shield till the squad engaged the man force. They were all hampered by the Covenant, but once they had arranged their directional shield, there were some minor tricks they were permitted as diversionary tactics while they tried to sneak to within arm's reach for legal battle.

But the lone Durth pressed forward, taking chances, thrusting wrath and maribane, evidently intent on keeping Melkyn from returning to the squad to warn them. He had no way of knowing Kronsk had already been sent back. And he presented one excellent opportunity too many. Melkyn couldn't resist. The Durth laid himself open for a quick mirror-thrust, and though that wasn't strictly legal, Melkyn exposed herself long enough to make it.

She would have been all right, except this Durth had a sword. Caught in the reflection of his own hunched wrath, he had time for just one thrust while she held the mindmirror, and before she restructured her shield. But that was enough. When he fell with a windy moan against the bright pink branches of a liberty bush, his sword fell with him, stained with Melkyn's blood.

Melkyn clutched her own sword as she fell, but she knew she would have no further need of it. The Durth sword had penetrated her subliminal shield and her shoulder in one clean stroke. The ground hit her hard on the back and she watched in stunned surprise as the lavender sky darkened to purple pinwheels overhead. She thought at home, and waited with blinding loneliness that she'd had a chance to go there again. Then she remembered Leem's smiling eyes, and grinned at the memory. But as the agony of Durth poison bit into her shoulder, she twisted and cried out and, with a sense of terrible relief, let darkness carry her away from the war-torn forest of an alien land, into a region of dreamlike peace.

But the pain wouldn't let her rest. She woke to the sound of her own voice screaming. With an effort, she choked off the sound and blatantly surveyed her surroundings. Not much time had passed; the sun was still high, its yellow-pink light barely enough to warm her. Her uniform tunic was wet with blood. With her good hand she reached to touch her wounded shoulder and found a padded field bandage over it. Puzzled, she lifted her head to look.

There was something soft and red in her hand, but she couldn't hold up her head

long enough to see what it was. Carefully blinking against pain, she used her good hand to take the soft little object from the nerveless fingers of her injured arm and lift it into her field of vision. A bright red daisy. She almost smiled, before the darkness carried her down again. She clutched the flower convulsively and wondered, without much interest, how long it would take her to die.

When she woke again, painkilling drugs had reduced her agony to a roiling ache. Her voice was moaning instead of screaming, she clamped her jaw shut to smother the sound. Something shaded the sun from her eyes. She blinked, squinted, and blinked again. Leem's smile swam out of blurry infinity, his large eyes watched Melkyn attentively. When Melkyn would have sat up, he used both slender six-fingered hands to hold her down, and tilted a singing comment, gesturing for her to look beyond him.

She moved her head enough to see Jasd and Kruby bringing an improvised pipe-wood stretcher toward her. Jasd, seeing Melkyn was awake, grinned at her and wiped her own forehead with a bloody bandaged hand. Leem saved your life, Serge, she said. You better break him right from now on, he braved the damn Durth to lead us back here in time. And he stopped the bleeding first, which is more than I could've done by the time we got here.

"The Durth?" asked Melkyn, her voice thin and hollow.

All dead, said Kruby. Thanks to you and Kronsk. We got our squadhead positioned in time, and kept them busy with pyrotechnics from behind it while two of us flanked them and pinned them down to some legal fighting. Here they'll hurt, but we gotta get you back. Kronsk, come on over here. Jasd can't lift a damn thing with that hand.

They got Melkyn on the stretcher and started home, a weary band of reluctant warriors whose job, for this one day, was done. And if that ain't a homecoming wound you got for yourself! I don't know what is, said Fu.

That's right, said Kruby. You're going home for sure this time, Serge.

Watch your language, soldier, said Jasd. "Home is a bit of a letter word."

How does it feel to be a free woman? asked Himm.

Ask me after the healers confirm it, said Melkyn.

Always the pessimist, said Kronsk.

grunting under the weight of her end of the stretcher.

Melkyn grinned, dizzy from pain and the drugs that dulled it. Leem walked beside the stretcher, holding Melkyn's hand. As they passed another field of daisies, he pointed it out to Melkyn and then, on impulse, ran across the pink ground cover toward a cluster of indolent blossoms. Melkyn started to tell him back, the area still wasn't secure. But this field was far from the village, and near no main paths, booby traps and mindblasts were unlikely. Lulled by Leem's laughter and the sweet, pure joy of being alive, she turned her head so she could watch the boy bounding across the field.

She was looking directly at him when he topped the mine. It charged him into a twirling, crazy tangled mess four meters in the air and tumbling, bloody and mangled and dead before the shimmer of detonation reached the squad. They froze in their tracks, staring.

Gods-damned po-mine, said Kronsk, her voice incredulous, as though she, like Melkyn, had believed the boy charmed.

Melkyn was off the stretcher before she knew what she was doing. Kruby caught her when she would have fallen. It's too late, Serge. He's dead.

He might as well not have spoken. Melkyn ignored him and pushed away his helping hands. She didn't speak, just stumbled in a broken, shambling run toward the field where Leem lay. Fu caught up with her and slid one arm under Melkyn's good shoulder. Let me help, Serge, he said.

Melkyn leaned on him, but didn't slacken her pace. If they were within a few meters of the corpse that had been Leem, it no longer even vaguely resembled an Ecleean boy. Melkyn crumpled to her knees two meters short of it. Still she said nothing, just stared, while the rest of the squad, cautiously shielding against further mines, came up behind her and stopped. Nobody moved beyond her. They all just stared, as though they'd never seen any one die-blinded before.

"Damn this war," said Kruby.

"Damn it to all the hells," said Jasd.

Melkyn wavered, and Fu put one hand on her shoulder for support. Melkyn closed her eyes. Jasd came up beside her and knelt, putting one arm across her shoulders. You have to go to the healers, she said. Let us help you.

Leem. Her voice was curiously flat.

It's too late. We can't help him now, said Jasd.

Melkyn looked across the field of wind-tossed daisies. The one clean, sweet pretty thing. The one undented creature in hell. He was too pure, too full of joy, too separate from the filth of war to die of it.

She closed her eyes again and bent forward, crawling to what remained of him, trying to remember his smile. When her fingers touched him, she stopped. She didn't open her eyes. The thing under her hand was wet and warm and smelled of death. She clenched her teeth, but the awful, broken words burst out in spite of her. No. Please. No.

Nobody moved. They watched her, and they waited silently.

And she watched the memory of Leem, fitting like a sweet green wrath among the leaves and flowers and sunlight of the afternoon and laughing, if the Durth had obeyed by the Covenant, he would be laughing still. For one anguished, wrathful moment she wanted to strike out against all of them, blast them out of their homes and cities and wipe them off the face of the planet, and be done. To all the hells with the Covenant, if it constrained her to light at arm's reach while her enemies struck down innocents at a distance.

But the Durth were sentient beings, too, and must have innocents among them. Even if she could, all by herself, without Talents to help her, blast their cities and loved ones, their wretched civilization to dust, she would stay her hand. Because there would be Leem's among the Durthdead, too. That was the whole point of the Covenant. It was, in a way, the point of this endless war.

The Oath of Soldiers echoed unexpectedly in her mind. I will defend my home and my people and my way of life, but only at arm's reach. I will give my enemies a chance at my lifeblood, in exchange for my chance at theirs. I will uphold the Covenant with all the shields I can muster, and thus will I preserve the innocence of innocents. For I believe wars must be fought always and only by soldiers, if any sentiments are to survive.

"Damn this war," she said. The words tasted of death. But the song of her laughter echoed in her ears with the Oath, and she whispered aloud: I will preserve the innocence of innocents. Very slowly like an old woman, she let Fu and Jasd help her to her feet. I will uphold the Covenant. But oh, his song was sweet!

SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS

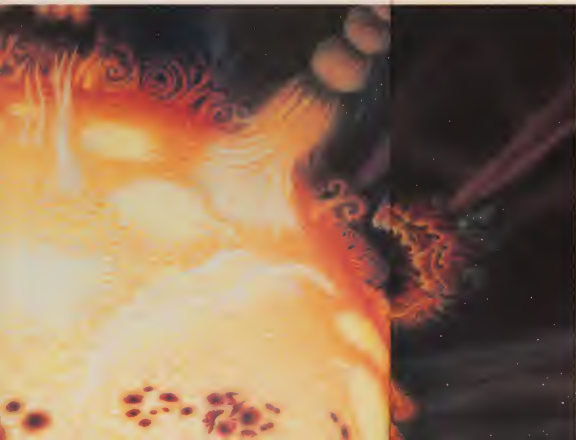
To acquaint new readers of science fiction with the standing science fiction of the past, a classics feature was launched in the first volume in this series. Stories originally published as early as 1938 ("Helen O'Leary" by Lester del Rey) and as recently as 1971 ("My Lady of the Psychiatric Sorrows" by Brian Aldiss) have since been presented.

Carrying forward this policy, we now offer two outstanding tales that have never before appeared in any science-fiction magazine. They were specifically selected for this volume by the noted science-fiction sociologist Terry Carr, himself the author of the novel *Cirque Cygne* by Poul Anderson, originally published in a 1968 anthology, *The Furthest Reaches*, edited by Joseph Elder. It is an excellent example of Anderson's ability to combine scientific extrapolation with human emotions. In this instance, the love that grows between a human woman and an alien vertex creature.

"The Howls as Werwolf" by Gene Wolfe presents a future society artificially "evolved" to something more than human and fraught with gruesome peril. The story originally appeared in *The New Improved Sun*, a 1971 anthology edited by Thomas M. Disch. Wolfe, incidentally, insists on the German spelling, *Werwolf*.

Readers who find "Kyrie" to their taste will definitely want to secure a copy of *The Best of Poul Anderson*, a book of short stories published in 1971. Anderson's best novels include *Brain Wave* (1954), *The Enemy Stars* (1959), *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961), and *Tau Zero* (1970).

The best short-story collection of Wolfe is a strangely titled book, *The Coldest of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories* (1980); his best novels are *The Shadow of the Torturer*, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, *The Sword of the Lictor*, and *The Citadel of the Autarch* (all published in the 1980s).



KYRIE

*Survival depended on
the vortex creature and its
communion with Eloise*

BY POUL ANDERSON

On a high peak in the Lunar Capathians stands a convent of St. Martha of Bethany. The walls are native rock, they lie dark and cragged as the mountainside itself, into a sky that is always black. As you approach from Nantipode, tilting low to keep the force screens along Route Plato between you and the meteoroidal rim, you see the cross which surmounts the tower, stark against Earth's blue disc. No bells resound from there—not in any season.

You may hear them inside at the canonical hours, and throughout the crypts below where machines toil to maintain a semblance of terrestrial environment. If you linger awhile, you will also hear them cooing to requiem mass. For it has become a tradition that prayers be offered at St. Martha's for those who have perished in space, and they are more with every passing year.

This is not the work of the sisters. They minister to the sick, the needy, the crippled, the insane, all whom space has broken and cast back. Luna is full of such cases because they can no longer endure Earth's pull or because it is feared they may be incubating a plague from some unknown planet or because men are so busy with their ironfists that they have no time to spare for the failures. The sisters wear space suits as often as habits, are as likely to hold a medkit as a rosary.

But they are granted some time for contemplation. At night, when for half a month the sun's glow has departed, the chapel is unshuttered and stars look down through the glazed dome to the candles. They do not wink and their light is winter cold. One of the nuns in particular is there as often as may be, praying for her own dead. And the

PAINTING BY SHEILA ROSE

abbess seek to it that she can be present when the yearly mass that she endowed before she took her vows is sung.

*Requiem aeternam dona eis: Domine
et lux perpetua luceat eis.
Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.*

The Supernova Sagittarii expedition comprised fifty human beings and a farrago of warperpetua Acelesians. They were part of stopping at Epsilon Lyrae to pick up its last member. Thence it approached its destination by stages.

This is the paradox: time and space are aspects of each other. The explosion was more than a hundred years past when noted by men on Lashope. They were part of a generations-long effort to fathom the civilization of creatures altogether unlike us, but one night they looked up and saw a light so brilliant it cast shadows.

That wave front would reach Earth several centuries hence. By then it would be so tenuous that nothing but another bright point would appear in the sky. Meanwhile, though, a ship overlapping the space through which light must creep could track the great star's death across time.

Suitably far off, instruments recorded what had been before the outburst: incandescence collapsing upon itself after the last nuclear fuel was burned out. A joltup and they saw what happened a century ago: convulsion, storm of quanta and neutrinos, radiation equal to the missed hundred billion suns of the galaxy.

It faded, leaving an emptiness in heaven and the Raven moved closer. Fifty light-years—fifty years—ward, she studied a shinking firmness in the midst of a fog which shone like lightning.

Twenty-five years later the central globe had dwindled more. The nebula had expanded and dimmed. But because the distance was now so much less, everything seemed larger and brighter. The naked eye saw a dazzle too fierce to look straight at making the constellations pale by contrast. Telescopes showed a blue white spark in the heart of an opalescent cloud delicately flattered at the edges.

The Raven made ready for her final jump to the immediate neighborhood of the supernova.

Captain Teodor Szil went on a last-minute inspection tour. The ship murmured around him, running at one gravely of acceleration to reach the desired intrinsic veloci-

ty. Power dioned, regulators whickered, ventilation systems rustled. He felt the energies quiver in his bones. But metal surrounded him, blank and comfortable. Viewports gave on a dragon's hoard of stars, the ghostly arch of the Milky Way, on vacuum cosmic rays, cold not far above absolute zero, distanced beyond imagination to the nearest human hearthline. He was about to take his people where none had ever been before, into conditions none was sure about, and that was a heavy burden on him.

He found Eloise Waggner at her post, a cubbyhole with intercom connections directly to the command bridge. Music drew him, a triumphant tenor he did not recognize. Stopping in the doorway, he saw her seated with a small tape machine on the desk.

"What's this?" he demanded.
"Oh! The woman (he could not think of her as a girl, though she was barely out of her teens) started. I . . . I was waiting for the jump.

"You were to wait at the altar."
"What have I to do?" she answered less timidly than was her word. "I mean, I'm not a creamer or a scientist."
"You are in the crew. Special communications technician."

With Lucifer. And he likes the music. He says we come closer to oneness with it than in anything else he knows about us. Szil arched his brows. "Oneness?"

A blush went up Eloise's thin cheeks. She stared at the desk and her hands twisted together. Maybe that isn't the right word. Peace, harmony, unity, God? I sense what he means, but we haven't any word that fits.

"Hmm. Well, you are supposed to keep him happy. The skipper regarded her with a taint of the distaste he had tried to suppress. She was a decent enough sort, he supposed, in her gauche and inhibited way, but her looks! Sawrny, big, looted big-nosed, pop-eyes and stringy dark-colored hair—and to be sure, telepaths all ways made him uncomfortable. She said she could only read Lucifer's mind, but was that true?"

No. Don't think such things. Loneliness and oneness can come near breaking you out here, without adding suspicion of your fellows.

If Eloise Waggner was really human, She must be some kind of mutant at the very least. Whoever could communicate thoughts with a living vortex had to be . . . What are you playing? Szil asked.

Blah. The Third Brandenburg Concerto to He, Lucifer, he doesn't care for the modern stuff, I don't either.

"You wouldn't Szil decided. Aloud. Listen, we jump in half an hour. No telling what we'll emerge in. This is the first time any one's been close to a recent supernova. We can only be certain of so much: hard radiation that we'll be dead if the shields give way. Otherwise we've nothing to go on except theory. And a collapsing stellar core is so unlike anything anywhere else in the universe that I'm skeptical about how good the theory is. We can't let daydreaming. We have to prepare."

Yes, sir. Whispering her voice lost its usual harshness.

He stared past her, past the ophean eyes of meters and controls, as if he could penetrate the steel beyond and look straight into space. There he knew floated Lucifer.

The image grew in him, a freball, twenty meters across, shimmering white red, gold, royal blue, flames dancing like Medusa locks, cometary tail burning for a hundred meters behind, a shiningness a glory a piece of hell. Not the least of what troubled him was the thought of that which paced his ship.

He hugged scientific explanations to his breast, though they were like better than guesses. In the multiple star system of Epsilon Aurigae, in the gas and energy pervading the space around, things took place which no laboratory could mimic. Ball lightning on a planet was perhaps analogous as the formation of simple organic compounds in a primordial ocean is analogous to the life which finally evolved. In Epsilon Aurigae, magnetohydrodynamics had done what chemistry did on Earth. Stable plasma vortices had appeared, had grown, had added complexity until after millions of years they became something you must needs call an organism. It was a form of ions, nuclei, and force fields. It metabolized electrons, nucleons. X rays maintained its configuration for a living lifetime. It reproduced, it thought.

But what did it think? The few telepaths who could communicate with the Aurigaeans, who had first made humankind aware that the Aurigaeans existed, never explained clearly. They were a queer lot themselves.

Wherefore Captain Szil said, I want you to pass this on to him.

Yes, sir. Eloise turned down the volume on her tape. Her eyes unfocused. Through

her ears went words, and her brain (how efficient a transducer was it?) passed the meanings on out to him who looped alongside Raven on his own reaction drive.

Lutan Lucifer: You have heard this often before, I know, but I want to be positive you understand it full. Your psychology must be very foreign to ours. Why did you agree to come with us? I don't know. Technician Waggoner said you were curious and adventurous. Is that the whole truth?

"No matter. In half an hour we jump. We'll come within five hundred million kilometers of the supernova. That's where your work begins. You can go where we dare not observe what we can't tell us more than our instruments would ever hint at. But first we have to verify we can stay in orbit around the star. This concerns you, too. Dead men can't transport you home again.

"So, in order to enclose you within the jumpfield, without disrupting your body, we have to switch off the shield screens. We'll emerge in a lethal radiation zone. You must promptly retreat from the ship, because we'll start the screen generator up sixty seconds after transit. Then you must investigate the vicinity. The hazards to look for—Silli listed them. Those are only what we can foresee. Perhaps we'll find other perils we haven't predicted. If anything seems like a menace, return at once, warn us, and prepare for a jump back to here. Do you have that? Repeat.

Words jerked from Eloise. They were a correct recital, but how much was she leaving out?

Very good. Silli hesitated. Proceed with your concert if you like. But break it off at zero minus ten minutes and stand by.

Yes, sir. She didn't look at him. She didn't appear to be looking anywhere in particular.

His footsteps clacked down the corridor and were lost.

Why did he say the same things over? asked Lucifer.

He is afraid, Eloise said.

—?

I guess you don't know about fear, she said.

—Can you show me? No, do not. I sense it is harmful. You must not be hurt.

I can't be afraid anyway, when your mind is hiding mine.

Warmth filled her. Memmert was there, playing like little flames over the surface of Father-leading her by-the-hand when she was just a child and they went out

one-summer-a-day-to-pick-wildflowers over strength and gentleness and Bach and God.) Lucifer swept around the hull in an ebullient curve. Sparks danced in his wake.

—Think flowers again. Please.

She tried.

—They are like (image as nearly as a human brain could grasp, of fountains blossoming with gamma-ray colors in the middle of light, everywhere light.) But so try. So baffle a sweetness.

I don't understand how you can understand, she whispered.

—You understand for me. I did not have that kind of thing to love, before you came.

But you have so much else. I try to share it, but I'm not made to feel so what a star is.

—Nor I for planets. Yet ourselves may touch.

Her cheeks burned anew. The thought rolled on, interweaving its counterpart to the marching music. —That is why I came, do you know? For you. I am fire and air. I had not tasted the coolness of water, the patience of earth, until you showed me. You are moonlight on an ocean.

No, don't, she said. Please.

Puzzlement. Why not? Does joy hurt? Are you not used to it?

I guess that's right. She hung her head back. "No! Be damned if I feel sorry for myself!"

—Why should you? Have we not all reality to be in, and is it not full of suns and songs?

Yes, to you. Teach me.

—If you in turn will teach me.— The thought broke off. A contact remained, unspoken, such as she imagined must often prevail among lovers.

She glowered at Muzil Mazundar's chocolate face, where the physicist stood in the doorway. What do you want?

He was surprised. Only to see if everything is well with you, Miss Waggoner.

She bit her lip. He had tried harder than most abided to be kind to her. I'm sorry she said. I didn't mean to bark at you. Nerves.

We are everyone on edge. He smiled. Excuse though this venture is, it will be good to come home, correct?

Home, she thought, four walls of an apartment above a banging city street. Books and television. She might present a paper at the next scientific meeting, but no one would invite her to the parties afterward.

Am I that horrible? she wondered. I know

I'm not anything to look at, but I try to be nice and interesting. Maybe I try too hard.

—You do not with me, Lucifer said.

You're different, she told him.

Mazundar blinked. Beg pardon?

Nothing, she said in haste.

I have wondered about an item, Mazundar said in an effort at conversation.

Presumably Lucifer will go quite near the supernova. Can you still maintain contact with him? The time dilation effect will that not change the frequency of his thoughts too much?

"What time dilation? She forced a chuckle. I'm no physicist. Only a little librarian who turned out to have a wild talent.

You were not told? Why. I assumed everybody was. An intense gravitational field affects time just as a high velocity does. Roughly speaking, processes take place more slowly than they do in clear space. That is why light from a massive star is somewhat reddened. And our supernova core retains almost three solar masses. Furthermore, it has acquired such a density that its attraction at the surface is an incalculably high. Thus by our clocks it will take infinite time to shrink to the Schwarzschild radius, but an observer on the star itself would experience this whole shrinkage in a fairly short period.

"Schwarzschild radius? Be so good as to explain. Eloise realized that Lucifer had spoken through her.

If I can without mathematics. You see, the mass as we are to study is so great and so concentrated that no force exceeds the gravitational. Nothing can counterbalance. Therefore the process will continue until no energy can escape. The star will have vanished out of the universe. In fact, theoretically the contraction will proceed to zero volume. Of course, as I said, that will take forever as far as we are concerned. And the theory neglects quantum mechanical considerations which come into play toward the end. Those are still not very well understood. I hope from this expedition to acquire more knowledge. Mazundar shrugged. At any rate, Miss Waggoner, I was wondering if the frequency shift involved would not prevent our friend from communicating with us when he is near the star.

I doubt that. Still, Lucifer spoke, she was his instrument and never had she known how good it was to be used by one who cared. Telepathy is not a wave phenomenon. Since it transmits instantaneously, it

cannot be. Nor does it appear limited by distance. Rather, it is a resonance. Being attuned, we two may well be able to continue thus across the entire breadth of the cosmos, and I am not aware of any material phenomenon which could interfere.

I said, Mazundar gave her a long look. Thank you, he said uncomfortably. Ah, I must get off without stopping for an answer. Eloise didn't notice. Her mind had become a torch and a song. Lucifer! she cried aloud. Is that true?

—I believe so. My entire people are telepaths; hence we have more knowledge of such matters than yours do. Our experience leads us to think there is no limit.

You can always be with me? You always will?

—If you so wish, I am gladdened. The comet body convulsed and danced; the brain of one laughed low. —Yes, Eloise, I would live very much to remain with you. No one else has ever—Joy, Joy, Joy.

They named you better than they knew, Lucifer! she wanted to say, and perhaps she did. They thought it was a joke; they thought by calling you after the devil they

could make you safely small like themselves. But Lucifer isn't the devil's real name. It means only Light Bearer. One Latin prayer even addresses Christ as Lucifer. Forgive me, God. I can't help remembering that. Do You mind? He isn't Christian, but I think he doesn't need to be. I think he must never have felt an Lucifer, Lucifer.

She sent the music soaring for as long as she was permitted.

The ship jumped. In one shift of world-line parameters, she crossed twenty-five light years to destruction.

Each knew it in his own way, save for Eloise who also lived it with Lucifer.

She felt the shock and heard the out-raged metal scream; she smelled the ozone and ascorch and tumbled through the infinite falling that is weightlessness. Dashed she tumbled at the intercom. Words crackled through—unit blown—back EMF surge—how should I know how long to let the blasted thing?—stand by stand by. Over all hooded the emergency siren.

Terror rose in her, until she gripped the crucifix around her neck and the mind of

Lucifer. Then she laughed in the pride of her might.

He had whipped clear of the ship some distance on arrival. Now he floated in the same orbit. Everywhere around the nebula filled space with unostentatious rainbows. To him Raven was not the metallic cylinder which human eyes would have seen, but a lam-bency, the shield screen reflecting a whole spectrum. Ahead lay the supernova core, tiny at this remove but a light, a light.

—Have no fears (he caressed her). I comprehend. Turbulence is extensive, so soon after the detonation. We emerged in a region where the plasma is especially dense. Unprotected for the moment before the guard an field was reestablished, your man generator outside the hull was short-circuited. But you are safe. You can make repairs. And I am in an ocean of energy. Never was I so alive. Come, swim these tides with me.

Captain Szeli's voice yanked her back. Weggoner! Tell that Aungpan to get busy. We've spotted a radiation source on an innermost orbit, and it may be too much for our screens. He specified coordinates. What is it?

For the first time, Eloise felt alarm in Lucifer. He curved away from the ship.

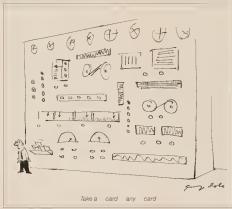
Presently his thought came to her, no less vivid. She lacked words for the terrible splendor she viewed with him: a million kilometer ball of ionized gas where luminance trailed and electric discharges leaped, booming through the haze around the star's exposed heart. The thing could not have made any sound, for space here was still almost a vacuum by Earth's parochial standards; but she heard a thunder and felt the fury that spat from it.

She said for him: A mass of expelled material. It must have lost radial velocity to friction and static gradients, been drawn into a cometary orbit, held together for a while by internal potentials. As if the sun were trying yet to bring planets to birth—

It strikes us before we are in shape to accrete! Szeli said, and overlaid to accrete shield. If you know any prayers, use them.

Lucifer! she called for she did not want to die, when he must remain.

—I think I can deflect it enough, he told her with a grimace; she had not hit her mark in him. My own fields to mesh with its, and free energy to drink, and an unstable configuration, yes, perhaps I can help you. But help me, Eloise. Fight by my side. His brightness moved toward the juggernaut shape.



Take a card any card

She felt how its chaotic electromagnetic arm clawed at his. She felt him tossed and torn. The pain was hers. He battled to keep his own cohesion, and the combat was hers. They locked together. Aungean and gas cloud. The forces that shaped him grappled as arms might; he poured power from his core, hauling that vast tenuous mass with him down the magnetic torrent which streamed from the sun; he gulped atoms and thrust them backward until the jet splashed across heaven.

She sat in her cubicle, tending him what will to live and prevail she could, and beat her fists bloody on the desk.

The hours brawled past.

In the end, she could scarcely catch the message that flickered out of his exhaustion — Victory.

Yours, she wept.

—Ours.

Through instruments, even saw the luminous death pass them by. A cheer lifted. Come back, Eloise begged.

—I cannot. I am too spent. We are merged, the cloud and I, and am tumbling in toward the star (like a hurt hand reaching forth to comfort her). Do not breathe for me. As we get closer, I will draw fresh strength from its glow, fresh substance from the nebula. I will need a while to spiral out against that pull. But how can I fail to come back to you, Eloise? Wait for me. Rest. Sleep.

Her shipmates led her to sick bay. Luckier sent her dreams of life-flowers and mirth and the suns that were his home.

But she woke at last, screaming. The medic had to put her under heavy sedation.

He had not really understood what it would mean to confront something so violent that space and time themselves were twisted thereby.

His speed increased appallingly. That was in his own measure, from Raven; they saw him fall through several days. The properties of matter were changed. He could not push hard enough or fast enough to escape.

Radiation stripped nuclear particles from and destroyed and born again, sleeked and shrouded through him. His substance was peeled away, layer by layer. The supernova core was a white diskum before him. It shrank as he approached, ever smaller, denser, so brilliant that brilliance ceased to have meaning. Finally the gravitational forces laid their full grip upon him.

—Eloise! he shrieked in the agony of his

disintegration. —Oh, Eloise, help me!

The star swallowed him up. He was stretched infinitely long, compressed infinitely thin, and vanished with it from existence.

The ship prowled the farther reaches. Much might yet be learned.

Captain Sorli visited Eloise in sick bay. Physically she was recovering.

I'd call him a man, he declared through the machine mumble, except that's not praise enough. We weren't even his kin and he died to save us.

She regarded him from eyes more dry than seemed natural. He could just make out her answer. He is a man. Doesn't he have an immortal soul, too?

Well, uh, yes, if you believe in souls, yes, I agree.

She shook her head. But why can't he go to his rest?

He glanced about for the medic and found they were alone in the narrow metal room. What do you mean? He made himself pat her hand. I know, he was a good friend of yours. Still, he must have been a merciful death. Quick, clean. I wouldn't

mind going out like that.

For him, yes, I suppose so. It has to be. But— She could not continue. Suddenly she covered her ears. Stop! Please!

Sorli made soothing noises and left. In the corridor he encountered Mazundar. How is she? the physicist asked.

The captain scowled. Not good. I hope she doesn't crack entirely before we can get her to a psychiatrist.

Why, what is wrong?

She thinks she can hear him. Mazundar smote fist into palm. I hoped otherwise, he breathed.

Sorli braced himself and walked.

She does, Mazundar said. Obviously she does.

But that's impossible! He's dead!

He will always be with her!

Remember the time dilation, Mazundar replied. He fell from the sky and perished swiftly, yes. But in supernova time. Not the same as ours. To us, the final stellar collapse takes an infinite number of years. And telepathy has no distance limits. The physicist started walking fast, away from that cabin.





*A tinkering with evolution
had created a utopia, except that
man had become food for men*

THE HERO AS WERWOLF

BY GENE WOLFE

Feet in the jungle
that leave no mark!
Eyes that can see
in the dark—the dark!
Tongue—give tongue to it!
Hark! O Hark!
Once, twice and again!
Rudyard Kipling
"Hunting Song
of the Seconee Pack"

An owl shrieked, and Paul
flinched. Fear, pavement, flesh,
death, stone, dark, loneliness,
and blood made up Paul's
world; the blood was all much
the same, but the fear took sev-
eral forms, and he had hardly
seen another human being in the
four years since his mother's
death. At a night meeting in the
park, he was the red-checked
young man at the end of the last
row, with his knees together and
his scrupulously clean hands
(Paul was particularly careful
about his nails) in his lap.

The speaker was fluent and
amusing; he was clearly conversant
with his subject—whatever
it was—and he pleased his au-
dience. Paul, the listener and
watcher, knew many of the

words he used, yet he had un-
derstood nothing in the past
hour and a half, and sat
wrapped in his stolen cloak and
his own thoughts, seeming to lis-
ten, watching the crowd and the
park—this, at least, was no
ghost-house, no trap, the moon
was up, night-blooming flowers
scented the park air, and the
trees lining the paths glowed
with self-generated blue light in
the city, beyond the last hedge,
the great buildings new and old
were mountains lit from within.

Nether human nor master, a
policeman strolled about the
fringes of the audience, his eyes
bright with stupidity. Paul could
have killed him in less than a
second, and was enjoying a
dream of the policeman's death
in some remote corner of his
mind even while he concen-
trated on seeming to be one of
them. A passerby's rocket
passed just under the stars trail-
ing luminous banners.

The meeting was over, and he
wondered if the rocket had in
some way been the signal to end
it. The masters did not use time,
at least not as he did, as he had

been taught by the thin woman
who had been his mother in the
little home she had made for
them in the turret of a house that
was once (she said) the Gordius
—now only a house too old to be
destroyed. Neither did they use
money, of which he like other
old-style Homo sapiens still re-
tained some racial memory, as
of a forgotten god, a magic
once potent that had lost all
force.

The masters were rising, and
there were tears and laughter
and that third emotional tone that
was neither amusement nor sor-
row—the sicken sound humans
did not possess, but that Paul
thought might express content
as the purring of a cat, doves, or
community, like the cooing of
doves. The policeman bobbed
his hairy head, grinning, bask-
ing in the recognition, the ap-
proval of those who had raised
him from animality. See (said the
motions of his hands, the
writings of his body) the cloth-
ing you have given me. How
nice! I take good care of my
things, because they are yours.
See my weapon. I perform a

PAINTING BY GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

useful function—if you did not have me you would have to do it yourselves.

If the policeman saw Paul, it would be over. He was too stupid, too silly to be deceived by appearances as his masters were. He would never dare thinking him a master to meet Paul's eye, but he would look into his face seeking approval, and would see not what he was supposed to see but what was there. Paul ducked into the crowd, avoiding a beautiful woman with eyes the color of pears, preferring to walk in the shadow of her fat escort, where the policeman would not see him. The fat man took dust from a box shaped like the moon and rubbed it between his hands, releasing the smell of raspberries. It froze, and he sipped the tiny crystals of crimson ice over his shirtfront, grunting with satisfaction, then offered the box to the woman, who refused it first, only (three steps later) to accept when he pressed it on her.

They were past the policeman now. Paul dropped a few paces behind the couple, wondering if they were the ones tonight—if there would be meet at all. For some, vehicles would be waiting. If the pair he had selected were among these, he would have to find others quickly.

They weren't. They had entered the canyons between the buildings, he dropped further behind, then turned aside.

Three minutes later he was in an alley a hundred meters ahead of them, waiting for them to pass the mouth. (The old trick was to cry like an infant, and he could do it well, but he had a new trick—a better trick, because too many had learned not to come down an alley when an infant cried. The new trick was a silver bell he had found in the house, small and very old. He took it from his pocket and removed the rag he had peeked around the clapper. His dark cloak concealed him now, its hood pulled up to hide the pale gleam of his skin. He stood in a narrow doorway only a few meters away from the alley's mouth.)

They came. He heard the man's thick laughter, the woman's sibilant sound. She was a trifle silly from the dust the man had given her and would be holding his arm as they walked, rubbing his thigh with hers. The man's blackshod foot and big belly thrust past the stonework of the building—there was a muffled moan.

The fat man turned, looking down the alley. Paul could see hair growing in the woman's face, cutting too slowly through the odor of raspberries. Another moan, and the man strode forward, fumbling in his pocket

for an aluminum. The woman followed hesitantly (her suit was of flowering vines, the color of love, and white skin flashed in the interstices, a serpent of gold supported her breasts).

Someone was behind him. Pressed back against the metal door he watched the couple as they passed. The fat man had gotten his aluminum out and held it over his head as he walked, looking into corners and doorways.

They came at them from both sides, a girl and an old, gray-bearded man. The fat man, the master, his genetic heritage re-wired for meditation and peace, had hardly time to turn before his mouth pushed blood. The woman whined and ran, the vines of her skirt withering at her thought to give her leg-room, the serpent dropping from her breasts to strike with fangless jaws at the flying-haired girl who pursued her, then winding itself about the girl's ankles. The girl fell, but as the pearl-eyed woman passed Paul broke her neck. For a moment he was too startled at the sight of other human beings to speak. Then he said, "These are mine."

The old man, still bent over the fat man's body snarled. "Ours. We've been here an hour and more." His voice was the creaking of steel hinges, and Paul thought of ghost-houses again.

I followed them from the park. The girl, black-haired, gray-eyed when the light from the alley-mouth struck her face, was taking the serpent from around her legs—it was once more a lifeless thing of soft metal mesh. Paul picked up the woman's corpse and whapped it in his cloak. "You gave me no warning," he said. "You must have seen me when I passed you."

The girl looked toward the old man. Her eyes said she would back him if he fought and Paul decided he would throw the woman's body at her.

Somebody'll come soon, the old man said. And I'll need James's help to carry this one. We each take what we got ourselves—that's for. Or we whip you. My girl's worth a man in a fight, and you'll find I'm still worth a man myself, old as I be.

Give me the picking of his body. This one has nothing.

The girl's bright lips drew back from strong white teeth. From somewhere under the tattered shirt she wore, she had produced a long knife, and sudden light from a window high above the alley ran along the edge of the stained blade. The girl might be a dangerous opponent, as the old man

claimed, but Paul could sense the femininity, the woman-rut from where he stood.

No, her father said. You got good clothes. I need these. He looked up at the window fearfully, fumbling with buttons.

His cloak will hang on you like a blanket.

He could not carry both, and the fat man's meat would be tainted by the toxicity. When Paul was young and there had been no one but his mother to do the killing, they had sometimes eaten old males, he never did so now. He slung the pearl-eyed woman across his shoulders and trotted away.

Outside the alley the streets were well lit and a few passersby stared at him and the dark burden he carried. Fewer still, he knew, would suspect him of being what he was—he had learned the trick of dressing as the masters did, even of wearing their expressions. He wondered how the black-haired girl and the old man would fare in their ragged clothes. They must live very near.

His own place was that in which his mother had borne him, a place high in a house built when humans were the masters. Every door was nailed tight and boarded up, but on one side, a small garden lay between two wings, and in a corner of this garden, behind a bush where the shadows were thick even at noon, the bricks had fallen away. The lower floors were full of rotting furniture and the smell of rats and mold, but high in his wooden turret the walls were still dry and the sun came in by crystal-egg windows. He carried his burden there and dropped her in a corner. It was important that his clothes be kept as clean as the masters kept theirs, though he lacked their facilities. He pulled his cloak from the body and brushed it vigorously.

What are you going to do with me? The dead woman said behind him.

Eat, he said her. What did you think I was going to do?

I didn't know. And then, I've read of you creatures, but I didn't think you really existed.

Were the masters once, he said. He was not sure he still believed it, but it was what his mother had taught him. This house was built in those days—that's why you won't wreck it, you're afraid. He had finished with the cloak, he hung it up and turned to face her, sitting on the bed.

You're afraid of waking the old ones, he said. She lay slumped in the corner and though her stomach moved, her eyes were

only half-open, looking at nothing.

"We tore a lot of them down," she said, "if you're going to talk, you might as well sit up straight." He lifted her by the shoulders and propped her in the corner. A nail protruded from the wall there; he twisted a lock of her hair on it so her head would not loll; her hair was the rose shade of a little girl's dress, and soft but slightly sticky.

"I'm dead," you know.
"No, you're not. They always said this (except, sometimes, for the children) and his mother had always denied it. He felt that he was keeping up a family tradition."

Dead—the pearl-eyed woman said. Never, never, never. Another year, and everything would have been all right. I want to cry, but I can't breathe to.

Your kind lives a long time with a broken neck," he told her. "But you'll die eventually."

I am dead now.
He was not listening. There were other humans in the city; he had always known that, but only now, with the sight of the old man and the girl, had their existence seemed real to him.

I thought you were all gone," the pearl-

eyed dead woman said thinly. All gone long ago, like a bad dream.

Happy with his new discovery, he said, "Why do you set traps for us, then? Maybe there are more of us than you think."

There can't be many of you. How many people do you kill in a year? Her mind was lifting the sheet from his bed, hoping to smother him with it, but he had seen that trick many times.

Twenty or thirty. (He was boasting.)
So many.

When you don't get much besides meat, you need a lot of it. And then I only eat the best parts—why not? I kill twice a month or more, except when it's cold, and I could kill enough for two or three if I had to. (The girl had had a knife. Knives were bad, except for cutting up afterward. But knives left blood behind. He would kill for her—she could stay here and take care of his clothes, prepare their food. He thought of himself walking home under a new moon and seeing her face in the window of the turret.) To the dead woman he said, "You saw that girl? With the black hair? She and the old man killed your husband, and I'm going to bring her here to live." He stood and began

to walk up and down the small room, soothing himself with the sound of his footsteps.

He wasn't, my husband. The sheet dropped limply, now that he was no longer on the bed. Why didn't you change? When the rest changed their games?

I wasn't alive then.
You must have received some tradition.
We didn't want to. We are the human beings.

Everyone wanted to. Your old breed had worn out the planet, even with much better technology; we're still starved for energy and raw materials because of what you did.

There hadn't been enough to eat before, he said, but when so many changed there was a lot. So why should more change?

It was a long time before she answered, and he knew the body was stiffening. That was bad, because as long as she lived in it, the flesh would stay sweet; when the life was gone, he would have to cut it up quickly, before the stuff in her lower intestine tainted the rest.

Strange evolution, she said at last. Man become food for man.



I don't understand the second word. Talk so I know what you're saying." He looked her in the chest to emphasize his point and knocked her over. He heard a rib snap. She did not reply, and he lay down on the bed. His mother had told him there was a meeting place in the city where men gathered on certain special nights—but he had forgotten (if he had known before) what those nights were.

That isn't even meta-language, the dead woman said, only children's talk. Shut up.

After a moment he said, "I'm going out. If you can make your body stand, and get out of here, and get down to the ground floor and find the way out, then you may be able to tell someone about me and have the police waiting when I come back." He went out and closed the door, then stood patiently outside for five minutes.

When he opened it again, the corpse stood erect with her hands on her table, her fingers upsticking the painted mask of a leghorn he had had since he was a child—the girl acrobat, the clown with his hoop and trained pig. One of her legs would not straighten. Listen, he said, you're not going to die. I told you all that because I knew you'd think of it yourself. They always do, and they never make it. The farthest I've ever had anyone get was out the door and to the top of the steps. She fell down them, and I found her at the bottom when I came back. You're dead. Go to sleep.

The blind eyes had turned toward him when he began to speak, but they no longer watched him now. The face, which had been beautiful, was now entirely the face of a corpse. The cramped leg crept toward the floor as he watched, halted, began to creep downward again. Sighing, he lifted the dead woman off her feet, replaced her in the corner, and went down the creaking stairs to find the black-haired girl.

There has been quite a few to come after her, her father said, since we came into town. Quite a few. He sat in the back of the bus, on the nearest seat that went completely across the back, like a sofa. "But you're the first ever to find us here. The others they hear about her and leave a sign at the meter."

Paul wanted to ask where it was such signs were left, but held his peace.

You know there isn't many folks at all anymore, her father went on. And not many of them is women. And damn few young girls like my Jane. I had a fella here

that wanted her two weeks back—he said he hadn't had no real women in two years well. I didn't like the way he said real, so I said what did he do, and he said he fooled around with what he killed, sometimes, before they got cold. You never did like that did you?

Paul said he had not.
How'd you find this dump here?

"Just looked around." He had searched the area in ever widening circles starting at the alley in which he had seen the girl and her father. They had one of the masters' cold boxes to keep their naps 'kils in (as he did himself), but there was the stink of clot-d blood about the dump nonetheless. It was behind a high fence, closer to the park than he would have thought possible.

When we come, there was a fella living here. Nice fella, a German. Name was Curtian—something like that. He went sweet on my Jane right off. Well, I wasn't too taken with having a foreigner in the family, but he took us in and let us settle in the big station wagon. Told me he wanted to wed Jane, but I said no, she's too young. Wait a year, I says, and take her with my blessing. She wasn't but fourteen then. Well, one night the German fella went out and I guess they got him, because he never come back. We moved into this bus then for the extra room.

His daughter was sitting at his feet, and he reached a crooked-fingered hand down and turned it in her midnight hair. She looked up at him and smiled. Got a pretty face, isn't she? he said.

Paul nodded.

She's a mite thin, you was going to say. Well, that's true. I do my best to provide, but I'm leared, and not shamed to admit it.

The ghost-houses, Paul said.

What's that?

That's what I've always called them. I don't get to talk to many other people.

Where the doors shut on you—and you're locked in.

Yes.

That ain't ghosts—now don't you think I'm one of them fools don't believe in them. I know better. But that ain't ghosts. They're always looking, don't you see, for people they think ain't right. That's us. It's electricity doesn't it, you ever been caught like that?

Paul nodded. He was watching the delicate swelling Jane's breasts made in the fabric of her flimsy shirt, and only half listening to her father, but the mercurial panic frayed the young desire that half embarrassed him, bringing back fear. The

windows of the bus had been set to black, and the light was dim—still it was possible some glimmer showed outside. There should be no lights in the dump. He listened, but heard only katydid singing in the rubbish.

They thought I was a master—I dress like one, he said. That's something you should do. They were going to test me. I turned the machine over and broke it, and jumped through a window. He had been on the sixth floor, and had been sawed by landing in the branches of a tree whose bruised twigs and torn leaves exuded an acrid incense that to him was the very breath of panic still, but it had not been the masters, or the instrument-filled examination room, or the jump from the window that had terrified him, but waiting in the ghost room while the walls talked to one another in words he could sometimes, for a few seconds, nearly understand.

It wouldn't work for me—got too many things wrong with me. Lines in my face, even got a wart—they never do. Jane could.

The old man cleared his throat. It was a thick sound, like water in a downspout in a hard rain. I been meaning to talk to you about her, about why those other fella's I told you about never look her—but that I'd let some of them. Jane's the only family I got left. But I ain't so particular I don't want to see her married at all—not a bit of it. Why we wouldn't of come here if it weren't for Jane. When her monthly come, I said to myself, she'll be wanting a man, and what're you going to do way out here? Though the country was gotten bad anyway. I must say if they'd of had real dogs, I believe they would have got us several times.

He paused, perhaps thinking of those times, the lights in the woods at night and the running, perhaps only trying to order his thoughts. Paul waited, scratching an ankle, and after a few seconds the old man said,

We didn't want to do this, you know, us Pendletons. That's mine and Jane's name—Pendellon, Jane's Augusta Jane, and I'm Emmett.

Paul Gorou, Paul said.

Peased to meet you, Mr. Gorou. When the time come they took one whole side of the family. They was the Worthmore Pendletons, that's what we always called them, because most of them I was thereabouts. Cousins of mine they was, and second cousins. We was the Everthow Pendletons and they didn't take none of us. Bad blood they said—too much wrong to be worth fix.

ing on too much that mightn't get fixed right and then show up again. My ma—she's alive then—she always swore it was her sister Lilliana's boy that did it to us. The whole side of his head was pushed in. You know what I mean? They used to say a cow'd kicked him when he was small, but it wasn't so—he's just born like that. He could talk some—there's those that set a high value on that—but the stammer'd run out of his mouth. My ma said if it wasn't for him we'd have got in sure. The only other thing was my sister Cara, that was born with a bad eye—blind, you know, and something wrong with the lid of it too. But she was just as sensible as anybody. Smart as a whip. So I would say it's likely Ma was right. Same thing with your family, I suppose?

I think so. I don't really know.
A lot of it was die-beetees. They could fix it, but if there was other things too, they just kept them out. Of course, when it was over there wasn't no medicine for them no more and they died off quick. When I was young I used to think that was what it meant, die-beetees—you died away. It's really sweetening of the blood. You heard of it?

Paul nodded.
I'd like to taste some sometime, but I never come to think of that while there was still some of them around.

If they weren't masters—
Don't mean I'd of killed them, the old man said quickly. Just got one to gash his arm a little, so I could taste of it. Black then—that would be twenty-aught nine, close to fifty years gone, it is now—there was several I knowed that was just my age. What I was meaning to say at the beginning was that us Pendletons never figured on anythin' like this. We'd farmed, and we meant to keep on growin' our own truck and breedin' our own stock. Well, that did for a time, but it wouldn't keep.

Paul, who had never considered living off the land, or even realized that it was possible to do so, could only stare at him.

You take chickens, now. Everybody all ways said there wasn't nothing easier than chickens, but that was when there was medicine you could put in the water to keep off the sickness. Well, the time come when you couldn't get it no more than you could get a can of beans in those stores of theirs that don't use money or cards or anything a man can understand. My dad had two hundred in the flock when the sickness struck, and it took every hen inside of four days. You wasn't supposed to eat them that had died sick, but we did it. Pucked 'em and

canned 'em—by that time our old locker that plugged in the wall wouldn't work. When the chickens was all canned, Dad saddled a horse we had then and rode twenty-five miles to a place where the new folks grow chickens to eat themselves. I guess you know what happened to him, though—they wouldn't sell, and they wouldn't trade. Finally he begged them. He was a Pendleton, and used to cry when he told of it. He said the harder he begged them, the scarier they got. Well, finally he reached out and grabbed one by the leg—he was on his knees to them—and he hit him alongside the face with a book he was carryin'.

The old man rocked backward and forward in his seat as he spoke, his eyes half-closed. There wasn't no more seed, but what was saved from last year then, and the comment so bad the ears wasn't no longer than a soft chick. No bullets for Dad's old gun, nowhere to buy new traps when what we had was lost. Then one day, just afore Christmas, these here machines just started tearing up our fields. They had for got about us, you see. We threw rocks, but it didn't do no good, and about midnight, one come right through the house. There wasn't no one living then, but Ma and Dad and brother Tom and me and Janie. Janie wasn't but just a little bit of a thing. The machine got f'm in the leg with a piece of two-by-four—rammed the splintery and into him, you see. The rot got to the wound and he died a week afore it was winter then, and we was living in a place me and Dad built up on the hill, out of branches and saplings and fallen wood.

About Janie, Paul said, I can see why you might not want to let her go—

Are you sayin' you don't want her? The old man shifted in his seat, and Paul saw that his right hand had moved close to the crevice where the horizontal surface joined the vertical. The crevice was a trifle too wide, and he thought he knew what was hidden there. He was not afraid of the old man, and it had crossed his mind more than once that if he killed him, there would be nothing to prevent his taking Janie.

I want her, he said. I'm not going away without her. He stood up without knowing why.

There's been others said the same thing, I would go, you know, to the mazin' the regular way, come back next month and the fella'd be waitin'.

The old man was drawing himself to his feet, his jaw outflung belligerently. They'd

see her, he said, and they'd talk a lot just like you, about how good they'd take care of her, though there wasn't a one brought a lick to eat when he come to call. Me and Janie, sometimes we ain't of for three, four days—they never take account of that. Now here, you look at her.

Bending swiftly, he took his daughter by the arm, she rose gracefully, and he spun her around. Her ma was a pretty woman, he said, but not as pretty as what she is even if she is so thin. And she's got sense too—I don't keer what they say.

Janie looked at Paul with frightened, animal eyes. He gestured, he hoped gently for her to come to him, but she only pressed herself against her father.

You can talk to her, She understands. Paul started to speak, then had to stop to clear his throat. At last he said, Come here, Janie. You're going to live with me. We'll return to see your father sometimes.

Her hand slipped into her shirt, came out holding a knife. She looked at the old man, who caught her wrist and took the knife from her and dropped it on the seat behind him, saying, You're going to have to be a mite careful around her for a bit, but if you don't hurt her none, she'll take to you pretty quick. She wants to take to you now—I can see it in the way she looks.

Paul nodded, accepting the gift from him almost as he might have accepted a package, holding her by her narrow waist.

And when you get a mess of grub, she likes to cut them up, sometimes, while they're still warm around. Mostly I don't allow it, but if you do—anyway, once in a while—she'll like you better for it.

Paul nodded again. His hand, as if of its own volition, had strayed to the girl's smoothly rounded hip, and he felt such desire as he had never known before.

Wait, the old man said. His breath was foul in the close air. You listen to me now. You're just a young fella, and I know how you feel, but you don't know how I do. I want you to understand before you go. I love my girl. You take good care of her or I'll see to you. And if you change your mind about wantin' her, don't just turn her out. I'll take her back, you hear?

Paul said, All right.
Even a bad man can love his child. You remember that, because it's true.

Her husband took Janie by the hand and led her out of the wrecked bus. She was looking over her shoulder, and he knew that she expected her father to drive a knife into his back.

They had seen the boy—a brown-haired, slightly freckled boy of nine or ten, with an armload of books—on a corner where a small, columnated building concealed the entrance to the monorial, and the streets were wide and empty. The children of the masters were seldom out so late. Paul waved to him, not daring to speak, but at tempting to convey by his posture that he wanted to ask directions; he wore the black cloak and scarlet-slashed shirt, the gold sandals and wide-legged, black, linen trousers proper to an evening of pleasure. On his arm, Jane was all in red, her face covered by a veil dotted with tiny synthetic bloodstains. Gown-studded veils were a fashion now nearly extinct among the women of the masters, but one that served to conceal the blackness of eyes that betrayed Jane, as Paul had discovered almost instantly. She gave a soft moan of hunger as she saw the boy, and clasped Paul's arm more tightly. Paul waved again.

The boy halted as though waiting for them, but when they were within five meters, he turned and dashed away. Jane was after him before Paul could stop her. The boy dodged between two buildings and raced through to the next street. Paul

was just in time to see Jane follow him into a doorway in the center of the block.

He found her clear-soled platform shoes in the vestibule, under a four-dimensional picture of Hugo de Vries. De Vries was in the closing years of his life and, in the few seconds it took Paul to pick up the shoes and conceal them behind an aquarium of phosphorescent cephalopods, had died rotted to dust, and undergone rebirth as a fascinating cell in his mother's womb, with all the labyrinth of genetics still before him.

The lower floors, Paul knew, were apartments. He had entered them sometimes when he could find no prey on the streets. There would be a school at the top.

A confused, frightened-looking woman stood in an otherwise empty corridor, a disheveled library book lying open at her feet. As Paul pushed past her, he could imagine Jane knocking her out of the way, and the woman's horror at the savage, exultant face glimpsed beneath her veil.

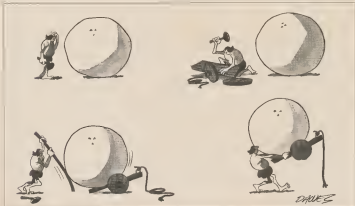
There were elevators, a liftshaft, and a downshaft, all clustered in an alcove. The boy would not have waited for an elevator with Jane close behind him.

The liftshaft floated Paul as spring water

floated a cork. Thickened by conditioning agents, the air remained a gas, enriched with added oxygen, it stimulated his whole being, though it was as viscous as corn syrup when he drew it into his lungs. Far above, suspended (as it seemed) in crystal and surrounded by the books the boy had thrown down at her, he saw Jane with her red gown billowing around her and her white legs flashing. She was going to the top, apparently to the uppermost floor, and he reasoned that the boy, having led her there, would jump into the downshaft to escape her. He got off at the eighty-fifth floor, opened the hatch to the downshaft, and was rewarded by seeing the boy only a hundred meters above him. It was a simple matter then to lower to the landing and pluck him out of the sighing column of thickened air as he waded by.

The boy's pointed, narrow face, white with fear under a tan, turned up toward him. Don't! the boy said. Please, in good manner—but Paul clamped him under his left arm and, with a quick wrench of his right, broke his neck.

Jane was swimming head down with the downshaft current, her mouth open and full of eagerness, and her black hair like a



cloud about her head. She had lost her veil. Paul showed her the boy and stepped into the shaft with her. The hatch slammed behind him, and the motion of the air ceased.

He looked at Jane. She had stopped swimming and was staring hungrily into the dead boy's face. He said, "Something's wrong," and she seemed to understand though it was possible that she only caught the fear in his voice. The hatch would not open, and slowly the current in the shaft was reversing, lifting them; he tried to swim against it, but the effort was hopeless. When they were at the top, the dead boy began to talk. Jane put her hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. The hatch at the landing opened, and they stepped out onto the hundred-and-first floor. A voice from a loudspeaker in the wall said, "I am sorry to detain you, but there is reason to think you have undergone a recent deviation from the optimal development pattern. In a few minutes I will arrive in person to provide counseling, while you are waiting, it may be useful for us to review what is meant by 'optimal development.' Look at the projection."

In infancy the child first feels affection for its mother, the provider of warmth and

food. "There was a door at the other end of the room, and Paul swung a heavy chair against it, making a din that almost drowned out the droning loudspeaker."

"Later, one's peer-group becomes, for a time, all-important—or nearly so. The boys and girls you see are attending a model school in Amstaring. Notice that no fist is used to mark the black of space above their intent."

The lock burst from the doorframe, but a remotely actuated hydraulic cylinder snapped it shut each time a blow from the chair drove it open. Paul slammed his shoulder against it and, before it could close again, put his knee where the shattered bolt-socket had been. A chrome-plated steel rod, as thick as a finger, had dropped from the chair when his blows had smashed the wood and plastic holding it. After a moment of incomprehension, Jane dropped the dead boy, wedged the rod between the door and the jamb, and slipped through. He was following her when the rod lifted, and the door swung shut on his foot.

He screamed and screamed again, and then, in the echoing silence that followed, heard the loudspeaker mumbling about

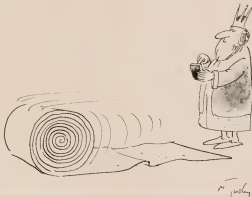
education, and Jane's sobbing, withdrawn breath. Through the crack between the door and the frame, the two-centimeter space held in existence by what remained of his right foot, he could see the livid face and blind, malevolent eyes of the dead boy, whose will still held the steel-rod suspended in air. "Die, Paul, shouted at him. 'Die! You're dead!' The rod came crashing down."

This young woman, the loudspeaker said, "has chosen the profession of medicine. She will be a physician, and she says now that she was born for that. She will spend the remainder of her life in relieving the agonies of disease."

Several minutes passed before he could make Jane understand what it was she had to do.

After her five years' training in basic medical techniques, she will specialize in surgery for another three years before—

It took Jane a long time to bite through his Achilles tendon, when it was over she began to tear at the ligaments that held the bones of the tarsus to the leg. Over the pain he could feel the hot tears washing the blood from his foot.



OMNI ENCORE PART TWO

The final section provides ample evidence of why *Omni* has become such a success among both inveterate SF readers and newcomers to the form. Not only are the stories reprinted here fine examples of fiction, but the pictorial is testimony to the magazine's innovative graphics.

The world that Russell Griffin describes in "Angel at the Gate" is not a pleasant place. But his protagonist, Rushmore, does what he must to survive. Rushmore learns the value of the hidden advantages of prosthesis, and he learns the value of teamwork and its costs. From the story we may conclude that the Big Rock Candy Mountain should join the Three L's as a misleading myth.

Tsutsui Yasutaka takes a hard look at overcrowding and regimentation in his story "Standing Woman," and envisions a society that has developed a new way to handle these problems. Some may call it inhuman, but not very loudly, lest they be overheard.

"A Cage for Death," Ian Watson tells of a man determined to discover what shape the Final Visitor takes. The problem, of course, is to lure Death close enough to be observed, but not too close.

There have been a myriad stories showing larger-than-life monsters wreaking ruin on the world in "The Microbotic Revolution," Ian Stewart restructures the Frankenstein legend to show us that smaller-than-life monsters can also create chaos.

Children play games to rehearse the skills they will need later in life. For adults, life itself becomes a game. In "The Last Waltz" by Warren Brown, a sociopathic games player hoists himself on his own petard and discovers that the game is only as strong as its weakest piece.

The theme of death and near-death evident in this section continues with Spide Robinson's "God Is an Iron," a science-fiction mystery story that includes irony, humor, philosophy, and surprise.

Paul Turner's photographic pictorial "Plains of Tomorrow" evokes a sense of time and otherworldliness. Although made right here on earth, of course, his pictures qualify splendidly as science-fiction visualizations. Working with photographs of natural objects, Turner achieves his surreal effects by manipulating color and by imaginatively combining nature's existing images. He does this, he says, "to take advantage of the time inherent in its reactions in it, to get the sort of effects I feel when I read science fiction." He succeeds.

*In a world of scarcity one will
give up anything to find
the Big Rock Candy Mountain*

ANGEL AT THE GATE

BY RUSSELL M. GRIFFIN

Everyone was seeing about what his Neck and the punk had found, but Rushmore's filters were clogged, and he had retreated to the place where he always slept when he passed this way wedged into the crotch where the slope of the fill met the underside of the ruined overpass. It was a good place to savor a ride because the occasional articulated hovertrucks had to slow to negotiate the gaps in the pavement. Also, it was drier than a natural cave, had pigeons instead of bats, and if an indecent female or a crusher came at him from one side, he could scuttle out the other. Caves usually had one exit, and Rushmore hated being closed in. Hated it more than anything.

He unlatched his nose shell and tipped it back against his forehead, so he could dig out the filter cartridge with his finger and tip it clean. Twenty years before, when he'd been brought in with his nose and chin and cheeks sheared away, the Army doctors had given him gila team implants to ease the strain on his

PAINTING BY CRISTOBAL TORAL



seared lungs because they were under orders to recycle casualties back to the front as soon as possible. One had assured him the fiber inside the plastic nose was twice as good as any mask as long as he kept his mouth shut, and he was damned lucky to have been hit by laser fire because a conventional explosion wouldn't have left enough time to work with and he'd probably have bled to death anyway.

The prostheses had looked fine, but since then the road had tanned and hardened his real skin until his leathery forty-year-old face had pulled away slightly to leave a purple seam around the firm nose and square jaw of the twenty-year-old he'd been. It was his eternally heroic plastic profile that had earned him the tag Rushmore among the hoboes and jokers.

But the nightmares hadn't changed. Always he was clawing at the hatch of the lumbering jack, lungs bursting, burning to fiery black skin as yellow gas seaked from the jammed vents, then emerging, gasping, the air outside computed, a color yellow cloud transected by laser beams refracting into sudden, then bright sticks of red. It was like a gas team had found him on the desert sand in time. Fate.

He looked glumly at the cartridge. Just about shot. Here to buy a new one soon and they are expensive. But without them he coughed up blood. So he did odd jobs like splitting cordwood or painting windmills when he needed replacements. Even work was better than coughing up blood, and on the road you learned to order your priorities. No use complaining about fate.

Stiffly he rose and went back down the slope to where the punk and No-Neck were talking with the others and watching the dog reviving slowly on a spit over the fire.

The trouble was that the hoboes, cut off from the network of television and computers that linked the isolated higger home steaks, lived in a world of rumors and superstices as primitive as Cro-Magnon man. Moreover, Rushmore hadn't known the punk long enough to trust her, and No-Neck couldn't talk. No-Neck had been with the Hundred First in Umm Said, but if he had nightmares like Rushmore's, fate hadn't left him a way to scream.

Rushmore paused to examine the sign No-Neck had scratched in the dirt to show what they'd seen, a half-circle peering from behind a triangle like a sun rising or setting behind a mountain.

You sure this is what you saw, No-Neck? You absolutely sure?

No-Neck looked up from the dog and wagged his head and shoulders.

It was on a fence two towns back this morning, the punk said, putting a wisp of hair out of her eyes. She was eighteen—twenty maybe. She'd learn. She'd have to. Mechanically.

You sure it wasn't some other sign that got smeared or something, like a triangle with two hands?

No-Neck tested emphatically.

Guess I know the sign for a man with a gun, the punk said. Just like I know a cross means a free meal if you listen to some God-bite, and two w's mean a baking dog. We saw what we saw.

What's the problem, Rushmore? Stumpie asked. We found the way at last—to the Big Rock Candy Mountain. She poked at the dog's crested and blackened flesh with the skeletons of her artificial fingers. Their plastic skin had worn away years before, and the metal amature inside had rusted into a hooked claw, but it served well enough. Stumpie's needs, like the others, were modest.

I don't get it, the punk said. It's just a story, isn't it? I mean the idea of someplace where there's always food and no crashes or bum weather and whatnot. How could anybody believe that?

Oh, it's true, right enough. Stumpie said, licking the grease from her fingers. Every truck barnacle knows it. Way I heard it, some corporation like IBM or Coke was building it during the war, but when they went bust in the crash, the banks boarded the place up. Afraid everybody and their mother would be beating down the doors if word ever got out.

If you think it was that simple, Crazy said, Adam's apple jerking like a bobber with a bass at the hook, "you're dumber than mud. The government was behind it. The whole deal was a string of pleasure palaces across the country to ensnare the working classes."

Rushmore smiled. Crazy was always saying things like that because he was a Communist or revolutionary or whatever and claimed the higgers had forfeited their rights by deliberately letting welfare go down the drain in the postwar crash, and anyway all wealth came from the earth, which really belonged to the whole human race. Crazy wanted to organize the hoboes to get their just deserts by force, but that was because he wasn't a true hobo. He was a submarine hiding out from the FBI and he didn't understand hoboes for shit. The last

thing a hobo wanted was to get organized. The whole point of road jacking was to live a life of freedom.

"They say it was left in perfect working condition," Stumpie mused. "Computer food and climate machines, three-D TVs, all kinds of stimulators. Enough to keep you happy forever in there."

Rushmore winced at that. But who'd want it if we found it? I didn't hit the road because I wanted a higger armchair or twenty-four-hour TV or a computer to balance my checkbook. Crazy, you telling me you'd give up politics for some machine making you hamburgers?

Courtesy, No. Crazy said brusquely. The Big Rock Candy Mountain is where all the hoboes'll be eventually, and that's the beginning of solidarity.

Well, Rushmore said, squatting down, "all I know is I never heard of this thing all a year or so ago."

That's perfectly logical, Crazy said. You've got to allow time after the war all the first hobo found it, or one of their scientists hit the road himself and started to blab. And then more time for word to get around. I heard about it from some old stiff on the coast quite a while ago."

If there really is such a place, Rushmore sneered, "it's Eden, and there'll be an angel at the gate. The higgers are too selfish to let us get it."

Anybody got a knife? the punk asked. I think Fidos does.

There was no talking during dinner, but later, warmed by the fire and bellies full, they debated what to do. Crazy thought they should travel in a group. That way we're each other's eyes and ears, he said.

That's like this guy told me once, Stumpie said. "A real smart customer, a professor writing this book about how we stick together and we're a separate society and everything. Said he was calling it *Invisible World* and he'd put my name in the acknowledgments if I'd—"

Anyway, Crazy said loudly, the sign No-Neck saw is probably smudged and gone by now. The best thing would be to head the way it said, toward the city.

Even if I wanted to find this place, Rushmore burst, "I always travel alone. You can't carry a ride behind an articulated with five people."

So what? Crazy said. "You can't look for signs hanging on the back of a drag by your fangs. Got to walk."

In the end Rushmore agreed despite himself, it was always easier to go with the

current, and he was still free to change his mind at any point. So the next morning after a ducks breakfast of cold water they set off across the fields. Trespassing was better than running into a crusher on the road. Near the outskirts of town, however, they found the road again and a sign. Not a second hobo sign scratched on handy trees or posts, but an official one.

WARNING

PERSONS FOUND GUILTY OF VAGRANCY
SUBJECT TO FULL FORCE OF 36TH AMENDMENT
Underneath, a joker had chalked two curved lines like the upper halves of two circles side by side and put a dot inside each open eye: a town on the lookout for hoboes. A town for hoboes to avoid.

They was a rumor about a state roundup in these parts a few months back. Stumpie said, absently scratching her chin with her rusted fingers.

What happened to them? the punk asked.

Guess they're rotting in some hugger jail, Rushmore said.

No, they stiddle your head. Crazy said. When you come out, you want to work in a factory. Call it retoling.

That would cost too much. Stumpie

said. They sell your parts to an organ bank and grind up the leftovers for fertilizer. That's what I heard.

You're scaring the punk. Rushmore said.

But did you ever actually meet a stiff that came back from a roundup? Stumpie asked. They just disappear.

That's a dumb rumor. Rushmore said. I've met lots of guys been in jail. Been there myself often enough.

In the good old days, maybe. Stumpie said, but not recently. I bet.

Behind them swelled an insectlike buzzing, and Rushmore turned to see a figure on a motor scooter tipping toward them along a side road and up across the crazed pavement of the highway into town. It was a local crusher, fitted out in a helmet and uniform leathers, his belt sagging like an October apple branch with two pistols, a box-stick and handcuffs. A badge jutted at his shirt pocket inside his open jacket. He eased to a stop several yards from them and dropped his foot to steady himself.

Where you scum headed? the crusher called over the burble of his motor.

Headed for a job a couple towns over. Rushmore said. Helping out a farmer with

the planting, you know?

Let's have the details, the crusher said, licking his lips nervously, his hand on one of the pistols. You know the law.

Over in Stratford. Rushmore said. Farmer by the name of Mancini.

Rushmore knew the crusher could check on it, but wouldn't. Even police were too busy hugging their homesteads and things. A farm two towns away was as remote and exotic to a hugger as China, computer phones or no.

You just make sure I don't find you inside the town limits in an hour, the crusher said. Because you lazy scuffers steal everything that's not nailed down. That's why you're vermin, and every honest person thinks you ought to be hunted down and exterminated like rats.

I don't remember you in the war, Stumpie muttered as the crusher gunned the scooter and jerked away, making a slow circle around them before he headed toward town, his motor's chatter diminishing into a dry and distant buzz.

Rushmore watched until he had disappeared. Obviously a town bully, used to beating up on hoboes but too chicken to take on five at once. Still, there was no use



Joseph Farrel

Goodnight, man. Don't push any buttons. I wouldn't push.

empting fate. Together they made too easy a target, ignoring Crazy's protests. Rushmore hopped the fence behind the sign and said good-bye. At first he let their reproachful eyes on his back, but after only a few minutes of walking it seemed a great weight had been lifted from him. Sharing a can of coffee or chow was one thing, but he was basically alone. Mooning a meal was easier with one, and you alone decided when to rest and when to move, how fast to go and in what direction. Absolute solitude was absolute freedom. If the others wanted to bunch together like so many grapes waiting to be plucked, that was their business.

As the sun peaked in the noontime sky, Rushmore's stomach began to gumble, and it was a relief when at last he found a sawdow on a gatepost the rear half of an R written backward, intersecting a perpendicular and surrounded by a cross. Good food in return for work. Signs were the hoboes' answer to computers.

The farm was set on a rise about a mile from the gate. Its outbuildings were sagging and dilapidated, and the only cultivated land was a small plot beside the house. Beginning to doubt the sign, he made his way past a collapsed compost pile for collecting methane for use in running

farm machinery. He stepped up on the back porch to knock.

The door opened the barest crack. "Get off the porch," said a frightened voice inside. Aroid voice, female.

Smiling and nodding, and showing he held no weapons, Rushmore backed down to the ground. Typical pokeout, soaked in her shadow. Just wondered, ma'am, if you had any chores an honest man down on his luck could do for a handout?"

My dog died," said the pokeout through the crack.

Sorry to hear that, ma'am. He wondered whether she was telling him to explain why she was afraid to open the door.

"She needs a grave," the voice said.

You just tell me where she is laid, Rushmore said, "and I'll take care of every thing."

"No," she said. "I know you people. You'll steal her and eat her. You just dig the grave and I'll do the rest after you go. There's a shovel around at the side of the house."

In the house's shadow, Rushmore found a patch of grass and began to dig, wondering whether it should be a big hole for a big dog or a small one for a little yap-yap. When he'd had enough, he leaned the shovel against the house and returned to the stoop

to find a square of corn bread and some home-canned peaches in a cracked bowl. He squatted and ate, using the stoop as a table. Not much of a meal, but better than nothing.

You know, ma'am, he called when he was done, "there're lots of jobs that need doing around here. I could help out for a day or so for a little food and maybe some change." He was thinking of the filters he'd be needing to replace.

A blind moved in one of the windows, but there was no answer.

I'm a veteran, you know, he called. "Got this in your war?" He reached up and opened his nose in a show of friendship and patriotism, but the house was silent.

And with her. The story was that if he'd been like Crazy, he could have broken in and taken anything he wanted. But if she wanted to survive instead of trust somebody enough to accept help, that was her choice. He cut across the leymyard, hungrily eyeing the solitary, bedraggled chicken roosting on the seat of a dead tractor, and headed through the fields toward the highway.

As luck would have it, a live unit drag flashed by just before he reached the road. He watched its articulated sections glinting in the afternoon sun as it snaked up the hill beyond. It could be a long war before the next one would come by.

With a shrug, he followed up the hill. At the top of the grade the semis would be slowing with lost momentum and easiest to pick. Further, he could catch a drag in either direction. So the decision of whether to follow the signs to the Big Rock Candy Mountain would depend on which way the next truck was headed. Leave it to fate. Life was best when you kept it simple.

Halfway up the hill, he noticed the bulk of an old automobile rusting in the grass just off the pavement. He walked over to it, trying to remember whether he'd actually seen cars on the roads when he was a kid or he'd seen they were fooling him with photos he'd seen. The doors and seats had been ripped out long ago, but a rusted-in car on the floor told him a brother or sister hobo had made this ancient artifact a temporary home awhile back.

He was about to go on when he noticed something scratched into the rust of the front fender: the triangle and half-circle of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Shit, there was no getting away from it.

"Gatcha!" said a voice behind him. He whirled to find the crusher in his greasy leathers, face beamed in a smile and



There's a son for better or worse the universe

Allright, he managed. I guess I've come this far.

Heart racing, Rushmore followed Stumpe and No-Neck, their footsteps echoing hollowly down through the mias of metal stairs between which now flickered the crusher's flashlight in Crazy's hand below them, its bright beam swirling with the dust they'd disturbed. At the first landing they found an old shoe planted against the wall and creaking stone wall, and farther down an ancient felt hat trampled into the slime of wet concrete crumbs. A roach sailed hurriedly behind its monstrously elongated shadow to escape the light as Crazy found the sign scratched into the rough wall and an arrow pointing downward still.

At the bottom, perhaps five stories beneath the street, a door stood open and the flashlight showed them a slice of endlessly twisting tunnel. Along its ceiling ran an arterial mass of small pipes dripping sudden diamond flashes of water through the beam, and on either side were huge steam pipes fat with asbestos wrappings.

Crazy led the way into the pounding heat. Sometimes they waded up to their ankles through urine-warm puddles quivering to drips from the pipes above, occasionally the passage logged with steam from a

small break and they ran with their hands up to protect their faces from the hot mist rising, and Rushmore contracted with the horrible gagging claustrophobia of the yellow gas cloud of his memories. Sometimes at ceiling level the walls opened into crawl spaces and recesses that echoed with scorchings and squeakings, while along the edges bright and hungry eyes glittered in the flashlight like a star field stretching into infinity.

They found the dead sign scratched in spidery white scars with a concrete chip across the grimy brick of a square column at the intersection of three tunnels, the arrow directed them down a descending passage to the left.

It's funny, Stumpe whispered. You'd go these ways dug before the buildings, right? So they ought to be laid out neat and square like what's above. But they curve around like

like wormholes. Rushmore said biting his lip.

They heard the rushing hiss of the steam break before the flashlight actually found it. The passage was choked with mist that swirled and glowed in the light. No. Rushmore thought. Can't breathe. Can't breathe.

But Crazy was already plowing into it

head down, the cloud brightening as it enveloped his light, the ragged shadows of Stumpe and No-Neck and the punk following. Rushmore plunged after them afraid to be left in the darkness, but touching his nose shell to reassure himself. However the steam wasn't hot and wet. It was cold and dry. He nearly tripped on No-Neck's lagging heel. No Neck was staggering, his face drawn up in an unearthly smile.

'You okay?' Rushmore grabbed him by the shoulders to steady him and found himself bumping into Stumpe's back. He realized that the cloud was no longer glowing with Crazy's flashlight but with a strong light pink as a Colorado sunrise that came from the far end of the tunnel.

Okay? Stumpe beamed. Course he's okay. It's great! She began to giggle.

Rushmore pushed past them and found the punk sagging on Crazy's arm. Crazy reeled under her weight and dropped the flashlight, and Rushmore stepped angrily to pick it up. Didn't Crazy think he'd need it to get out again?

In another moment they were out of the cloud in a vast, low-ceilinged room. On all four walls video screens glowed with endless meadows beneath perfectly blue skies, and there were just enough wisps of white cloud to add depth without threatening anything but eternally far June weather.

But will you look at the food? Stumpe was crowing. A goddamned endless feast! Dig in!

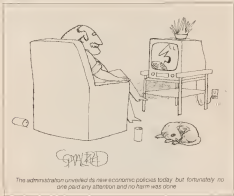
Here and there about the room were folding cafeteria's tables on which had been piled wadded sandwiches and cupcakes and soft drink tubes, some were gnawed by rats that looked back contemptuously at the newcomers, others crawled with roaches and black beetles.

Rushmore stared up at the ceiling, hung from the pipes were theatrical spotlights shining through pink gels. What's the matter with you all? he called as they stumbled toward the tables, scattering the rats and insects. It's like a goddamned masquerade—stale food and hard chairs, it's all soft lights and TV screens.

Crazy was giggling and trying to unwrap a pink-frosted cupcake topped with a bright red cherry.

And where is everybody? Rushmore demanded. Where are the hoboes from the railroad yard? Where's the one that let us in the signs? Tell me where the hell is he?

Aw. Stumpe said "he's out making more signs to show the way. Hell of a swell guy, right? Hell of a swell



The administration unveiled its new economic policies today, but fortunately no one paid any attention and no harm was done.

Philanthropist. Crazy said thickly mouth full of frosting: "Philanthropist philanthro—"

Rushmore suddenly felt light, his head spinning. He grabbed the edges of a table and shook his head to try to clear it. He looked up to see that several figures had appeared at the far end of the room with strange insect-like faces.

Gas masks, he thought groggily. The steam in the tunnel, a gas of some kind. His nose filters had protected him from what had happened to the others, but he'd still absorbed some through his skin and was feeling its effects.

Now one of the figures was beside No-Neck. He raised a club and brought it down sharply, connecting with a loud clack, and No-Neck spun away, fell stiffly across the table, and spilled to the floor.

A hugger trap to get rid of hoboes. Whole thing a big rat cage, a Venus-flytrap filled with sticky sweets. Should have known. Rushmore struggled to open his mouth. It felt as if it had marbles in it. "Run!" he gasped.

The figures looked up, surprised by his voice. Then one dashed out, and Stumpe jumped onto a folding chair that collapsed with her and clattered on the floor. Crazy and the punk glanced dreamily toward the sound, indifferent. For an instant longer Rushmore watched helplessly. Then he spun on his heel and bolted back into the passageway from which he and the others had emerged.

One's getting away! came a muffled shout from behind him.

He won't get far!

Back through the billowing doorway of binding gas he ran, back along the beam the flashlight stabbed into the darkness, floor scratching like rubber under him, panting, feet splashing through puddles on the stone floor. The dark walls closed in on every side, the glowering rats' eyes above, as he panted into burning suns. He felt as if he was in the tank again, and he ran.

He didn't remember getting out. When he awoke, he found himself sprawled on a matted carpet of mattresses, cushions, and newspapers, refuse from the hotel that had been decomposing for years. What better place for him, he thought. Human refuse. Used up in the war, tossed aside and forgotten.

His skull throbbing, he managed to get himself into a sitting position and finally to stand unsteadily. His head was still light, but he was better, much better. Thank God

for the war and the doctors! Fate again that's what it was.

He was only a block away from the brass door he'd entered—an hour ago? A day? A week? He had no idea. Warily he approached it and gazed up at the triangle and half-circle above it.

Stumpe. No-Neck. Crazy, the punk. No telling what had happened to them: no way to gauge how deep the hugger fears and resentments had grown. Would they be given lobotomies and sent off to work in factories? Would their organs be saved and the leftovers ground into fertilizer? Maybe once Rushmore had understood the hugger mind well enough to guess, but he had been cut off from their world too long, and things had changed.

No use mourning, he thought. Fate had gotten him out, and it was time to hit the road again, alone and independent, just like before.

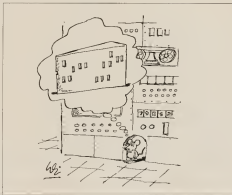
He paused. He'd never been independent, not really. The signs that had steered him away from danger and pointed him toward mosques and places to bunk had been scratched to him on posts and buildings by nameless hoboes who'd gone that way before. They had always been beside him, even when he'd imagined he was

alone. He patted them.

And the huggers. He'd thought he could coexist with them by staying out of their way, but they had reached out after him, had even gone so far as to appropriate and pervert the signs he and every other hobo had learned to stake their lives on. And in creating that shabby, fake Eden of stale sandwiches and rancid sweets under the city, they had shown their contempt for the hoboes' dreams and myths. He would pay them back for that.

He rose to his toes and rubbed his sleeve slowly and deliberately across the chalk. He'd blamed into the rough brick. Then, with a chip of fallen cornice from the ground, he scratched three horizontal lines, danger here.

The huggers would be back to replace it to lure more hoboes to destruction. No matter how many signs he collected, he knew there would always be more. But, lurking in doors and alleyways, he would outlast them for the sake of No-Neck and the rest. He would trade his freedom to repay those who had left their marks to guide him along the roads and highways he had followed for the last twenty years. It was simply what fate had always meant for him to be, the angel at the gate.



*Trees from the seeds
of discontent were springing up
all over the city*

STANDING WOMAN

BY TSUTSUI YASUTAKA

Translated from the Japanese by David Lewis

I stayed up all night and finally I finished a forty-page short story. It was a trivial, minor, unimportant piece, capable of neither harm nor good.

These days you can't write stories that might do harm or good; it can't be helped. That's what I told myself while I fastened the manuscript with a paper clip and put it into an envelope.

As to whether I have it in me to write stories that might do harm or good, I do my best not to think about that. If I were to think about it, I might want to try.

The morning sunlight hurt my eyes as I slipped on my wooden clogs and left the house with the envelope. Since there was still time before the first mail truck would come, I turned my feet toward the park. In the morning no children come to this park; a mere eighty square meters in the

middle of a cramped residential district. It's quiet here. So I always include the park in my morning walk. Nowadays even the scanty green provided by the ten or so trees is priceless in the megacopolis.

I should have brought some bread, I thought. My favorite dogpillar stands next to the park bench. It's an affable dogpillar with buff-colored fur.

The liquid fertilizer truck had just left when I reached the park; the ground was damp and there was a faint smell of chlorine. The elderly gentleman I often saw there was sitting on the bench next to the dogpillar feeding the bull pout, what seemed to me meat dumplings. Dogpillars usually have excellent appetites. Maybe the liquid fertilizer absorbed by the roots sunk deep in the ground and seeped on up through the legs, leaving something to be desired.

They'll eat just about anything you give them.

You brought him something? I slipped up today. I forgot to bring my bread. I said to the elderly man.

He smiled softly.

Ah, you like this fellow too?

Yes. I replied, sitting down beside him. He looks exactly like the dog I used to have.

The dogpillar looked up at me with large, black eyes and wagged its tail.

Actually, I kept a dog like this fellow myself, the man said, scratching the ruff of the dogpillar's neck. He was made into a dogpillar when he was three. Haven't you seen him? Between the haberdashery and the film shop on the coast road. Isn't there one there that looks like this fellow?

I nodded adding, Then that one was yours?

PAINTING BY VICTOR CUPSA



Yes, he was our pet. His name was Hachi. Now he's completely vegeztized. A beautiful dogtree.

Now that you mention it, he does look a lot like the fellow. Maybe they came from the same stock.

And the dog you kept? the elderly man asked. Where is he planted?

Our dog was named Bull. I answered shaking my head. He was planted beside the entrance to the cemetery on the edge of town when he was four. Poor thing, he died right after he was planted. The fertilizer trucks don't get out that way very often, and it was so far I couldn't take him food every day. Maybe they planted him badly. He died before becoming a tree.

Then he was removed?

No. Fortunately it didn't much matter there if he smelted or not, and so he was left there and died. Now he's a bonetpillar. He makes fine material for the neighborhood elementary-school science classes. I hear.

That's wonderful.

The elderly man stroked the dogpillar's head. This fellow here, I wonder what he was called before he became a dogpillar.

No calling a dogpillar by its original name. I said. Isn't that a strange law?

The man looked at me sharply then relaxed casually. Didn't they just extend the laws concerning people to dogs? That's why they lose their names when they become dogpillars. He nodded while scratching the dogpillar's jaw. Not only the old names, but you can't give them new names either. That's because there are no proper nouns for plants.

Why, of course I thought.

He looked at my envelope with many script enclosed written on it.

Excuse me, he said. Are you a writer?

I was a little embarrassed.

Well, yes. Just these little things.

After looking at me closely, the man returned to stroking the dogpillar's head. I allowed to write things.

He managed to suppress a smile.

How many years is it now since I stopped writing? It feels like a long time.

I stared at the man's profile. Now that he said so, it was as if I seemed to have seen somewhere before. I started to ask his name hesitated, and fell silent.

The elderly man said abruptly. It's become a hard world to write in.

I lowered my eyes, ashamed of myself who still continued to write in such a world.

The man apologized flummily when he

saw my sudden Depression.

That was rude. I'm not criticizing you. I'm the one who should feel ashamed.

No, I told him, after looking quickly around us. I can't give up writing because I haven't the courage. Giving up writing? Why after all that would be a gesture against society.

The elderly man continued stroking the dogpillar. After a long while he spoke.

It's painful, suddenly giving up writing. Now that it's come to this, I would have been better off if I'd gone on boldly writing social criticism and had been arrested. There are even times when I think that. But I was just a dietante, never knowing poverty, craving peaceful dreams. I wanted to live a comfortable life. As a person strong in self-respect, I couldn't endure being exposed to the eyes of the world, ridiculed. So I quit writing. A sorry tale.

He smiled and shook his head. No, no, let's not talk about it. You never know who might be listening, even here on the street.

I changed the subject. Do you live near here?

Do you know the beauty parlor on the main street? You live in there. My name is Hyama. He nodded at me. Come over sometime. I'm named, but.

Thank you very much.

I gave him my own name.

I didn't remember any writer named Hyama. No doubt he wrote under a pen name. I had no intention of visiting his house. This is a world where even two writers getting together is considered illegal assembly.

It's time for the mail truck to come.

Taking pains to look at my watch, I stood.

I'm afraid I'd better go, I said.

He turned a sadly smiling face toward me and bowed slightly. After stroking the dogpillar's head a little, I left the park.

I came out on the main street, but there was only a ridiculous number of passing cars. Pedestrians were few. A catpillar about thirty to forty centimeters high was planted next to the sidewalk.

Sometimes I come across a catpillar that has just been planted and still hasn't become a cattee. New catpillars look at my face and meow or cry, but the ones where all four limbs planted in the ground have vegeztized, with their greenish faces stiffly set and eyes shut tight, only move their ears now and then. Then there are catpillars that grow branches from their bodies and put out leaves. The mental condition of these seems to be completely vegeztized—

they don't even move their ears. Even if a cat's face can still be made out, it may be better to call these cattees.

Maybe, I thought, it's better to make dogs into dogpillars. When their food runs out, they get vicious and even turn on people. But why did they have to turn cats into catpillars? Too many strays? To improve the food situation by even a little? Or perhaps for the greening of the city.

Next to the big hospital on the corner where the highways intersect are two main trees, and ranged alongside those trees is a manpillar. This manpillar wears a postman's uniform, and you can't tell how far its legs have vegeztized because of its trousers. It is made thirty-five or thirty-six years old, tall, with a bit of a stoop.

I approached him and held out my envelope as always.

Registered mail, please.

The manpillar nodded silently, accepted the envelope and took stamps and a registered mail slip from his pocket.

I looked around quickly after paying the postage. There was no one else there, I decided to try speaking to him. I gave him mail every three days, but I still hadn't had a chance for a leisurely talk.

What did you do?

I asked in a low voice. The manpillar looked at me in surprise. Then, after running his eyes around the area, he answered with a sour look. Won't do to go saying unnecessary things to me. Even me. I'm not supposed to answer.

I know that. I said, looking into his eyes.

When I wouldn't leave, he took a deep breath. I just said the pay's low. What's more, I got heard by my boss. Because a postman's pay really is low. With a clank look, he jerked his jaw at the two mantees next to him. Those guys were the same. Just for letting slip some complaints about low pay. Do you know them? he asked me.

I pointed at one of the mantees. I remember this one, because I gave him a lot of mail. I don't know the other one. He was already a mantee when we moved here. That one was my friend, he said.

Wasn't that other one a chief clerk or section head?

He nodded. That's right. Chief clerk.

Don't you get hungry or cold?

You don't feel it that much, he replied, still expressionless. Anyone who's made into a manpillar soon becomes expressionless. Even I think I've gotten pretty plantlike. Not only in how I feel things, but in the way I think, too. At first I was sad, but now I don't matter. I used to get really

hungry, but they say the vegetizing goes faster when you don't eat."

He stared at me with lightless eyes. He was probably hoping he could become a mantis soon.

Talk says they give people with radical ideas a lobotomy before making them into mantilles, but I didn't get that done, either. Even so, a month after I was planted here I didn't get angry anymore.

He glanced at my wristwatch. "Well, you better go now. It's almost time for the mail truck to come."

"Yes. But still I couldn't leave, and I hesitated uneasily."

You, the mantiller, said: "Someone you know didn't recently get done into a mantiller, did they?"

Cut to the quick, I stared at his face for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Actually, my wife."

"Hmm, your wife is it? For a few moments he regarded me with deep interest. I wondered whether it wasn't something like that. Otherwise nobody ever bothers to talk to me. Then what did she do, your wife?"

"She complained that prices were high at a housewives' get-together. Had that been all, fine, but she criticized the government, too. I'm starting to make it big as a writer, and I think that the eagerness of being that writer's wife made her say it. One of the women there informed on her. She was planted on the left side of the road looking from the station toward the assembly hall and next to that hardware store."

"Ah, that place." He closed his eyes a little, as if recollecting the appearance of the buildings and the stores in that area. "It's a fairly peaceful street. Isn't that for the better?" He opened his eyes and looked at me searchingly. "You aren't going to see her are you?" It's better not to see her too often. Both for her and for you. That way you can both forget faster."

I knew that. I hung my head.

"Your wife?" he asked, his voice turning slightly sympathetic. "Has anyone done anything to her?"

No. So far nothing. She's just standing, but unseen—"

Hey. The mantiller serving as a post-box raised his jaw to attract my attention. "It's come. The mail truck. You'd better go. You're right."

Taking a few wavering steps, as if pushed by his voice, I stopped and looked back. "Isn't there anything you want done?"

He brought a hand up to his cheeks and shook his head.

The red mail truck stopped beside him. I moved on past the hospital.

Thinking I'd check in on my favorite bookstore, I entered a street of crowded shops. My new book was supposed to be out any day now, but that kind of thing no longer made me the slightest bit happy.

A little before the bookstore in the same row is a small, cheap candy store, and on the edge of the road in front of it is a mantiller on the verge of becoming a mantis. A young male, it is already a year since it was planted. The face has become a brownish color tinged with green, and the eyes are tightly shut. Tail back slightly bent, the posture slouching a little forward. The legs torso, and arms, visible through clothes reduced to rags by exposure to wind and rain are already vegetized, and here and there branches sprout. Young leaves bud from the ends of the arms, reach above the shoulders like boating wings. The body which has become a tree, and even the face no longer move at all. The heart has sunk into the tranquil world of plants.

I imagined the day when my wife would reach this state, and again my heart winced.

with pain trying to forget. It was the anguish of trying to forget.

If I turn the corner at the candy store and go straight, I thought, I can go to where my wife is standing. I can meet my wife. I can see my wife. But if I don't do it, I told myself. There's no telling who might see you, if the woman who informed on her questioned you, you'd really be in trouble. I came to a halt in front of the candy store and peered down the road. Pedestrian traffic was the same as always. It's all right. Anyone would overlook it if you just stand and talk a bit. You'll just have a word or two. Dealing my own voice screaming. Don't go! I went briskly down the street.

Her face pale, my wife was standing by the road in front of the hardware store. Her legs were unchanged, and it only seemed as if her feet from the ankles down were buried in the earth. Expressionless, as if trying to see nothing, feel nothing, she stared steadily ahead. Compared with two days before, her cheeks seemed a bit hollow. Two passing factory workers ported at her, made some vulgar joke, and passed on guffawing uproariously. I went up to her and tasted my voice.

"Michiko!" I yelled right in her ear. My wife looked at me, and blood rushed



to her cheeks. She brushed one hand through her tangled hair.

"You've come again? Really, you must! I can't help coming."

The hardware store mistress, tending shop, saw me. With an air of feigned indifference, she averted her eyes and retired to the back of the store. Full of gratitude for her consideration, I drew a few steps closer to Michiko and faced her.

"You've gotten pretty used to it?"

With all her might she formed a bright smile on her stiffened face. "Mmm, I'm used to it."

Last night it rained a little.

Still gazing at me with large, dark eyes, she nodded lightly. "Please don't worry. I hardly feel anything."

"When I think about you I can't sleep. I hung my head. You're always standing out here. When I think that, I can't possibly sleep. Last night I even thought I should bring you an umbrella."

"Please don't do anything like that! My wife frowned just a little. 'It would be terrible if you did something like that!'"

A large truck drove past behind me. While dust thickly veiled my wife's hair and shoulders, but she didn't seem bothered.

"Standing out really all that bad. She spoke with deliberate lightness, working to keep me from worrying."

I perceived a subtle change in my wife's expression and speech from two days before. It seemed that her words had lost a shade of delicacy and the range of her emotions had become somewhat impoverished. Watching from the sidelines like this, seeing her gradually grow more expressionless, it felt like more desolating for having known her as she was before—those keen responses, the bright vivacity, the rich, full expressions.

"These people. I asked her, running my eyes over the hardware store—are they good to you?"

"Well, of course. They're kind at heart. Just once they told me to ask if there's anything I want done. But they still haven't done anything for me."

"Don't you get hungry?"

"She shook her head."

"It's better not to eat."

So, Unable to endure being a manipilar she was hoping to become a mantrise even so much as a single day faster.

"So please don't bring me food. She stared at me. Please forget about me. I think, certainly, even without making any particular effort, I'm going to forget about

you. I'm happy that you come to see me, but then the sadness drips on that much longer. For both of us."

"Of course you're right, but— Desiring this self that could do nothing for his own wife, I hung my head again. But I won't forget you. I nodded. The tears came. I won't forget. Ever."

When I raised my head and looked at her again, she was gazing steadily at me with eyes that had lost a little of their lustre, her whole face beaming in a faint smile like a carved image of Buddha. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile like that.

I felt I was having a nightmare. No, I told myself, this isn't your wife anymore.

The but she had been wearing when she was arrested had become tentily dirty and filled with wrinkles. But of course I wouldn't be allowed to bring a change of clothes. My eyes rested on a dark stain on her skirt. Is that blood? What happened?

Oh, then, she spoke faintly, looking down at her skirt with a confused air. "Last night two chinks played a prank on me."

"The bastards!" I felt a furious rage at their inhumanity. If you put it to them, they would say that since my wife was no longer human, it didn't matter what they did.

"They can't do that kind of thing! It's against the law!"

"That's right. But I can hardly appeal."

And of course I couldn't go to the police and appeal, either. If I did, I'd be looked on as even more of a problem person.

"The bastards! What did they—?" I bit my lip. My heart hurt enough to break. Did it bleed a lot?

"Mmm, a little."

"Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

Michiko, who had been so proud before, now showed just a little sadness in her face. I was shocked by the change in her. A group of young men and women, penetratingly comparing me and my wife passed behind me.

"You'll be seen," my wife said anxiously. I beg of you, don't throw yourself away. Don't worry. I smiled thinly for her in self-contempt. I don't have the courage. You should grieve."

"When you're a mantrise," I said in parting. "I'll petition. I'll get them to transplant you to our garden."

"Can you do that?"

"I should be able to. I nodded liberally. I should be able to."

"I'd be happy if you could," my wife said expressionlessly.

Well, see you later."

It'd be better if you didn't come again, she said in a murmur, looking down.

I knew that's my intention. But I'll probably come anyway."

For a few minutes we were silent.

Then my wife spoke abruptly.

"Good-bye."

"Umm."

I began walking.

When I looked back as I rounded the corner, Michiko was following me with her eyes, still smiling like a graven Buddha.

Embracing a heart that seemed ready to split apart, I walked. I noticed suddenly that I had come out in front of the station. Unconsciously, I had returned to my usual walking course.

Opposite the station is a small coffee shop. I always go to called Punch. I went in and sat down in a corner booth. I ordered coffee, drinking it black. Until then I had always had it with sugar. The bitterness of sugarless, creamless coffee pierced my body, and I savored it, musing absently. From now on I'll always drink it black. That was what I resolved.

Three students in the next booth were talking about a critic, who had just been arrested and made into a manipilar.

I hear he was planted smack in the middle of the Ginnu.

He loved the country. He always lived in the country. That's why they set him up in a place like that.

Seems they gave him a lobotomy.

And the students who tried to use force in the Diet, protesting his arrest—they've all been arrested and will be made into manipilars, too.

When I there almost thirty of them? Where'll they plant them all?

They say they'll be planted in front of their own university, down both sides of a street called Students Road.

They'll have to change the name now. Violence Grove, or something.

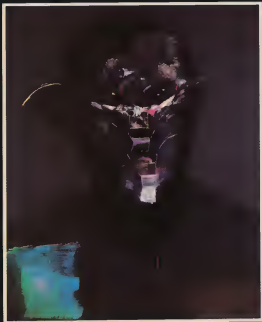
The three snickered.

Hey, let's not talk about it. We don't want someone to hear."

The three shut up.

When I left the coffee shop and headed home, I realized that I had begun to feel as if I was already a manipilar myself. Musing the words of a popular song to myself, I walked on.

I am a wayside manipilar. You, too, are a wayside manipilar. What the hell, the two of us, in this world. Dried grasses that never flower.



*Born of Hewitson's obsession, the
machine was built
to vanquish mankind's greatest foe*

BY IAN WATSON

A CAGE FOR DEATH

PAINTING BY MARSHALL ARISMAN

Ralph Hewitson's Thanatoscope was the ultimate product of that strange man's obsession with death. Thanatology is, of course, the study of dying, and Hewitson's machine was intended to enable us to see, and ideally to trap, Death itself. Or himself. Ralph Hewitson always took it very personally that he or anyone else should have to die.

No doubt all of us go through this stage of horror and affront when we are children. Then we tie the trauma away in the back of our mind. We lock it up in the mental lumber room and it crops out again only in our last days. Sometimes it remains as offensive as ever, but increasingly nowadays—thanks to the Thanatology Foundation's centers across the land and the reinterpretation of dying as an altered state of consciousness—it is transmuted into a friend, an intrinsic part of oneself, the keystone of the arch of life.

Hewitson, however, kept intact the old animist vision of some invisible thief of life. His Thanatoscope—the deathwatch device—was to be the tipwire camera, and cage, that surprised Death himself.

True, some scientific testing of death has been conducted in the centers in addition to the psychological studies and therapies—but only in the sense of weighing the body before and after death to see whether any tiny weight loss occurs, as if a departing soul, or using autophotography to try to record the departure on film. None of these fringe investigators have ever tried to demonstrate the converse occurrence, the arrival of Death as an active force.

Hewitson was a tall, black-haired man with a slight permanent stoop as if he never trusted doorways to be quite as strong as he thought.

"I wonder whether Death's doorway will let me pass when my time comes," he said to me one day, dourly humorous. "Or will I get stuck in it? Halfway in, halfway out? You know, I've been thinking that combs could simply be people who get stuck in that door. Their conscious mind has gone through, but the automatic mind gets left on our side of it, running the body mechanically."

"You mean the autonomic nervous system, don't you, Ralph?"

"Do I Do?"

I'd come to the Sixth Street Thanatology Center only three months earlier from Neo-Thanology College after majoring in Death-of-God counseling, and it was something of a shock for me to find someone who—if he plainly didn't believe in God—nevertheless firmly espoused the doctrine of death incarnate.

But I had taken a liking to his black jokes, which seasoned his obsession with a dash of pepper.

No doubt that was the way he performed in his own counseling of the dying—the made death seem something of a farce, a Marx Brothers comedy. That approach could probably work wonders with some people. I've met them. They hate to be contemplative about their demise. They think that it's sanctimonious. Whereas with other people who are still scared—well, a joke could be a fine nerve tonic.

Of course, to Ralph deep down this was no joking matter.

I was being given a guided tour of his machine up in his office on the fourth floor of the center. It was a pleasant, sunny room with a gilt-framed medieval *Dance of Death* on one wall and, by contrast, on another a large color photograph of the Taj Mahal. The machine, which took up most of the spare floor space, was the excluded middle, between horror and blissful peace. Ralph had, however, included it a way not of greeting death with alarm or wry joy but of damned well capturing him.

There was a waterbed-cum-bier implanted with microscopes, set within a delicately triggered Faraday cage, which could block out any and of the electromagnetic radiation or isolate any radiation arising within it. Enclosing this cage were polarizable glass walls that could be rendered opaque—turned into an infinite internal mirror. Various tiny cameras and mirrors were mounted within on silver rods, and outside the glass walls were fluorescent screens, an electron scanner, and a kind of hooded periscope. Also within were small, highly sensitive (to one part in a billion) chemical sniffers alert to the phenomena of death: the complex chemical released in minute traces by the dying body, that we sometimes call corpse sweat. This chemical is akin to all sexual attractor pheromones released by humans and all other creatures, and personally I think it is a normal evolutionary by-product a warning signal to others in the vicinity.

Most deaths in ancient times would have been violent, in one way or another, and spelled trouble. Hewitson, of course, thought differently. He had the notion of this molecule as an attractor signal, too. It was something that Death would smell and descend on like a mating moth. The death or gasp couldn't happen until Death had been called. This accounts for certain overly protracted deaths: the bodies of such people simply couldn't produce

enough of the pheromone.

True to form, Hewitson had managed to get tiny amounts of this corpse sweat synthesized, and he had built a number of prototype death traps designed to release quantities of it and to snap shut on whatever vectored in upon the molecule—with no success. So he concluded that a dying body actually needed to be there.

Despite his qualms at taking life—which he regarded as sacrificing to Death—Hewitson had equipped his second-generation traps with dying animals. But again with no result. Whereupon he conceived the idea that the deaths of animals and the deaths of people may be different in essence. (He became interested in the Catholic doctrine that animals have no souls and are automatic objects.)

Incorporated in his perfected machine as well, then, were tiny pheromone taps with the stored drops of the chemical isolated by vacuum and mini Faraday cages.

His idea was to imitate death, to hypnotize oneself into a deathlike trance, then turn the taps on.

"Do you want me to lie down in there?" I asked him. "Is that what all this is leading up to?"

"And then I release the nonexistent whiff of cyanide?" he suggested with a chuckle.

"Oh, no, Jonathan, nothing like that. But of course you can try it out for size and comfort if you like. The lie is a pretty famous bed soon. Much more famous than your historic beds where Good Queen Bess or Lincoln or Shakespeare slept. Go ahead, I'm not prejudiced."

Well, thank, but no thanks.

"I wonder whether I should equip it with cyanide gas or something similar. Then I not only catch Death, but kill him, too. After all, if you can legitimately shoot someone you catch burglarizing your apartment—well, Death's a mass murderer by comparison. The biggest criminal."

I couldn't tell whether he was serious.

"I wonder in that case whether I'd be killing Death in general, or just the personal death of whoever was in the machine."

A whole lot of people die every second, Ralph. They die simultaneously. Even if the Death of yours skipped about at the speed of light—

Okay, I see your point. I suppose Death could be general and particular, though. He hemmed and hawed awhile. "If I killed the particular death—if I zapped the bullet with his person's own special name on it, right out of the way, swatted it, squeezed it

reopened it—would this person—and his hand drifted over the imaginary contours of his subject volunteer—as sensuously as a fantasizing soldier stuck in a jungle hundreds of kilometers from a brothel—would this person live forever? Would I have perfected an immortality treatment? Rich (very Jonathan, for the Thanatology Foundation, thus to defeat its own purpose!) His voice hushed, mock-conspiratorially: Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. Your Neo-Thanatology College would be up in arms.

I guess it's a way of persuading people to volunteer. I poked in turn. Roll up, roll up! Come into Hewitson's Death Cage and he'll make thee immortal with a hiss of cyanide gas. Oh, but you're forgetting something, Ralph. You'd kill the subject that way, before you nailed his death. Baby and the bathwater. Ralph. Baby and the bathwater!

Ah. Ralph looked crestfallen. But this was all just horsing around. You're going to try it out yourself, then? I asked, more seriously. But by just simulating death? By pretending? I take it that I be with the Swami's help?

The Swami is our pet name for our Indian counselor, Mr. Ananda. Ananda has delved

deeper into the oceanic unity state of death (injection than anyone else I have ever met). Ananda has used deep meditation and self-hypnosis techniques—of Indian origin—to plumb this way station into nothingness, sometimes accompanying the dying down—or up there—in deep rapport with them—before returning to full life to report on it. Needless to say, Mr. Ananda has never met Death—Mr. D—on his journeys.

I've been taking lessons. Ralph nodded. Admittedly, I haven't spent years at it as he has. But I think I can turn the trick. I think so. When I get down deep enough, my own theta-thalamic brain waves will start the phenomenon of death-dripping.

When's all this going to happen? Next Tuesday. I'll need a few observers. Ananda has volunteered. Though he thinks my motives are—well, you understand. But he's cleared a space in his schedule.

I can spare the time, too, Ralph. Good man. Now look down here. He showed me how the periscope, the optic fiber, and the mirrors all the outside observer see around the whole inside of the cage even when the glass walls are mirror-opaque. As I gazed through the hooded periscope into the pearly ill interior, the

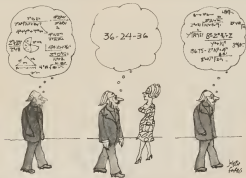
empty bed reduplicated itself, perhaps a dozen times in all directions before losing itself in a thickening golden fog while the fine green network of the Faraday cage overlapped and overlapped itself within the mirrors.

Tuesday came. Besides Hewitson and the Swami and me, there was also present in his office, Dr. Mary Ann Szczepanski, our foundation medic, looking lovely in light silver pajamas, her d'arçœur white coat carving her flanks in ivory marble.

Here, then, was the mousetrap with the big cheese—Hewitson, soon to be laid out in it, synthetically Gorgonzola-scented with death (though it wouldn't be an odor that any of us could pick up consciously), a trap of the nonlethal variety.

It's a lot far better thing I do now, Ralph grinned, hamming it up a little—to Swami Ananda's evident disapproval—as clad in a thin linen smock, he wiggled through the door of the Faraday cage, careful not to buckle any of the surrounding thin wires. He stretched himself out on the water bed.

I shut the door and locked it with Ralph's golden key, as per instructions. The key chain I slipped round my own neck. Then I



turned on the current to the cage, at very low power. It hummed faintly.

The glass walls descended and locked together, still in their see-through mode. Air recirculating.

"You look like Snow White," shouted Mary Ann, checking her vital signs on the readouts. But where's the poisoned apple?

Hearing her, Ralph nodded vocally in the direction of Mr. Ananda. Then Ralph composed himself as Ananda began caddy to intone a monotonous tape-loop refrain in Sanskrit, which Ralph took up—I suppose—in duet, though I couldn't hear his voice.

Soon Ralph raised his hand, and I peeped the glass walls.

When I peered in through the periscope, he was lying utterly still, looking suitably blanched and corpse-like in the pearly inner light. He lay beaded like mirrored steel, which by beside another mirrored self. Toe to toe with other selves. Each in their gilded cage, the bars of which grew thicker as the bodies proliferated further. It was quite easy to lose the center of focus and get lost.

The descent into the death trance took the best part of an hour. Mary Ann monitored Ralph's vital signs dutifully the whole time. The sun shone in through the window upon what seemed like a great marble block, a white kaaba, a mausoleum. A be-draggled pigeon strutted to and fro for a while on the window ledge. Distant street sounds drifted up, and a few times the whirring of copiers beat down. Otherwise it was very quiet.

Mr. Ananda peered at the brain wave screens. He tapped one with a slim brown finger and improbably manicured nail. "Here's the beginning of the theta-thetales rhythm."

I hugged the periscope hood around my head and heard only the Swami's voice. "The other rhythms have flattened out now. It takes four or five minutes more before the theta-thetales is full enough to switch on the pheromone drip. But I wasn't about to pull away. I had no intention of missing any thing—not that I believed there would be anything (and a videotape was running anyway)."

Ah. Pheromone drip on now. Mr. Ananda announced.

I watched the point of the needle, near Ralph's bare calf, easing—(at Mary Ann's command—to plunge a massive dose of stimulants into him should the need arise. I kept my hand on the button that would multiply the power fed into the Faraday cage hybrid.

What I saw then didn't record on the videotape—as if the tape couldn't register light of the wavelength I saw, as if it came from a different spectrum entirely! But my eyes saw it—I swear it.

A red (except that it wasn't red) thing appeared abruptly, patching on Ralph's chest. It was like a bat, it was like a giant moth, it was like an angel on a Christmas tree illuminated by lightning. It flickered strobelike. It seemed to dance in and out of existence. It had big gleamy eyes and a tiny sharp beak. It had scissor claws on its vest-like wings. If they were wings, like the spurs that are fastened on fighting cocks, I realized that I was seeing only what my eyes and brain could see, not necessarily what was actually there.

Theta finale! sang the Swami, who couldn't see any of this. Stimulants! Mary Ann. Administer the stimulants!

I already have! The signs show I squeezed my button, too, at the same time it was needed. Whatever Ralph had set up to trigger the powering of the cage had already done its job. The cage crackled with Myford insulation.

The needle had slid into Ralph's calf. He jerked, like one of Galvani's frogs.

He sat upright on the water bed, his eyes wide open.

The led thing leaped from him, flickering, phasing in, phasing out (but more in than out). It hit the side of the cage and seemed to pass through the electrified filigree. And the glass walls, too. But, no, it passed through yet not into the room where in it passed through into one of the reflected doubles of the cage, actually into it, leaving no original behind in the real cage. I realized, as I had earlier, that there had been only one, all along, from the moment of its first appearance. No reflections. No duplications. Many reflections of Ralph, but none of it. How could something I could see with my eyes not possess a reflection in a mirror? Perhaps I had to do with down in divisible existence.

The red moth beat from one phantom cage to the next, circling outward from the real Ralph Hewison. But as I got farther away, the golden bars thickened. Now it was flying into a wall of increasingly thick syrup. It could get no farther out through the reflections.

Ralph, sitting upright and following it with his gaze, grabbed in the air with both hands. The air above the real water bed was of course empty. The thing—Death—wasn't there. But all the hands of all his re-

flections grabbed in unison in all the mirror cages. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

Death flapped frantically around the circuit, from one cage to the next, to avoid his hands. But it was all one cage to Ralph.

He caught it. He caught it! In a cage three removed from the original, his reflection's hands closed on it and held it tightly. His own hands—and those of all the other reflections of him—were empty. But not that pair. Not those. They held the red thing. The bat moth, Death.

Death slashed at his hands with its wing claws and gouged with its beak. Blood ran down the hands and wrists of that one reflection. The real Ralph cried out in pain. Yet his hands showed no trace of wounds. Only the hands of the one mirror image that held the creature were flayed, but he felt the pain. He continued to wrestle with the creature, face distorted. He held on two empty hands cupped in midair, snaws standing out. And however much it hurt him, however much he felt his phantom fingers, his finger bones still held it securely out in the reflection.

What's happening? Mary Ann called. He's overreacting to the stimulant! What's happening, Jon?

He's fighting Death. I cried. He's caught Death and he's fighting it!

Just then Ralph turned to face me, to ward where he knew I must be. "Depolarize! Translucize the glass!" he shouted.

I tore myself from the periscope hood, found the switch, and hit it. Immediately all of us could see through the cage. And of course all of the reflection-worlds had disappeared.

But Ralph still wobbled, with thin air! His fingers still clutched. Ah, I could see what he was doing, though to the others it must have seemed an insane pantomime. He was tearing Death free so that he could hold it in one clenched hand, to throw it far away from him? No, he'd never give up his hold on Death now that he'd succeeded. He held that one imprisoning hand aloft in a kind of open fisted salute, gnashing through his agony, baring his teeth.

Cut the current! he ordered harshly. I squeezed the bulb. The crackling hiss faded away.

Unlock the cage, Jonathan! Even in his pain he refused to abbreviate my name. I hesitated briefly. Was I in effect, letting Death out into the world? But with the current no longer flowing, I suppose a mesh of wires could be no obstacle.

Ralph saw my hesitation. "You fool! I've got hold of him!" he shouted in my face from the other side of the series—which he could have burst through by main force, but even in extremis he had no wish to damage any part of his invention. "Anyways, he isn't here. Not in this here. He's still in the reflection—and I've got him tight there!"

Had he? Had he really? Or was the pain so deeply etched into his torn nerves and scoured finger bones that he only thought he had? Was he only feeling the ongoing light in the way that an amputee still feels intense pain from a severed phantom limb? As he continued to clutch the air and bite his lip, I couldn't believe that. The reflections had gone away, whenever reflections go when they're off duty, but his reflected hand was still clutching Death out there, mimicking the shape and stance of his flesh-and-blood hand here.

I took the key from my neck, snapping the chain in my haste. I jabbed it at the lock a few times before I got it in and turned it.

I pulled the door open. Ralph crawled out and stood, his clenched empty hand at arm's length, triumph and torment on his face, aghast face.

Three days have gone by now. Ralph

hasn't slept a wink. I doubt that he could let go now if he wanted to. His hand and Death are too intermixed: claws tripped in bones; bones binding wings. His hand remains bent like that of the worst victim of arthritis, unable to flex, yet to all other appearances a perfectly unblemished hand.

"Hysterical cramp" is what Dr. Szepanski diagnoses about his hand. She doesn't believe what I saw. Neither does Swam Ananda. They know there's no such thing as Death, and the videotape only shows Ralph alone in the cage, then suddenly jerking erect and scribbling at the empty air.

I'm alone with him now in the office. It's night. Many deaths occur at three o'clock in the morning. That's the dead point between night and day, the hour of despair, the low point of the body rhythms. Right now it's one thirty. Ralph sits slumped in his chair, kept awake by pain, his clenched hand resting on his desk.

You saw Jonathan?

I saw. Yes.

Mary Ann believes that I autohypnotized myself by staring through that periscope into the reduplicating mirror room too long. My attention drifted away into the mirrors. I

was virtually in a state of sensory deprivation. I was hallucinating freely and grandiosely when Ralph jerked upright and began his phantom fight. I was seeing a mote in my own eye. I gave it unrest! Me—just as Ralph, torn out of deepest trances, blood pounding through his heart, saw that blood personified in mirror as the rooster, the bat, the moth of death.

You believe me now, Jonathan?

Believe? I know.

So Ralph sits before me, holding Death at arm's length—though for how long? When Death at last escapes from him, does it wing elsewhere, or does it come directly here? Homing in, to perch on the real hand whose mirror image holds it all boy, captive in the realm of reflections?

It feels as if my bones are coming apart. Ralph groans. But maybe they aren't at all. "This hand's still solid. Oh, my too, too solid flesh! But I can't see them, the other bones I only feel. God, what I feel!"

Let him go. Open your hand.

I can't, Jonathan. I can't.

It's a quarter to two. Outside the city is as still as a sepulcher. Silent night. Ralph is too weary to scream.

Together we wait.



THE MICROBOTIC REVOLUTION

BY IAN STEWART

There's no future in robot
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optical etching techniques, maybe. But microbot-
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had with its microsurgery devices. Especially the
one for the inner ear. I should know. I'm a sales
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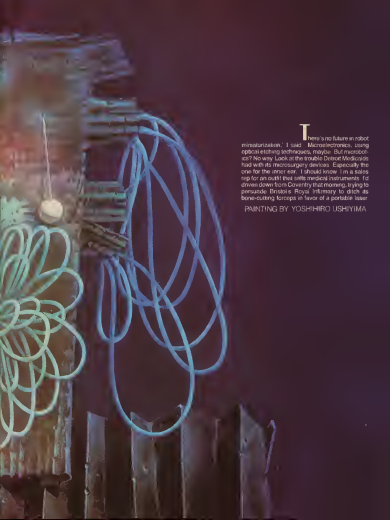
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They'd agreed it was a marvelous idea and shown me the new lasers they'd just bought from Takahashi Optonics. Still, I did get them to promise to order their petric pin joints through us in the future, so the journey wasn't entirely wasted after all.

Whenever I'm in Bristol, I try to look up Oliver Gurney. He's lived there for years and knows the city like the wrinkles on his elbow. Especially the pubs.

It was a cold night, but the fire in the lounge bar of the Tall Ship was burning brightly as the ale flowed, and I warmed to the topic. Control: Oliver that's the problem. Like threading a needle from a distance of ten feet in a hurricane. I lowered the level of my mug by a good two inches and leaned my elbow on the bar. Same again, please, Janice.

Oliver is some sort of Top Frog in a firm called Decal Electronics. He likes to think of himself as an engineering entrepreneur. His enthusiasm for a new idea is boundless and often clouds his judgement, which is lucky at the best of times. But every so often he has an idea that is truly mind-boggling in its audacity and he makes it work. I suppose you could call him an erratic genius. The time he had a bee in his bonnet about pea-sized robots. His pudgy face, with its battle-browed eyes, bore an expression that I had known of old.

"What we need," he said, "is a new approach. I'll concede Johnny that you can't build microscopic robots directly. But I think you could do it in stages.

Maybe. What's the limiting factor on the size of pocket computers?"

He grimaced. "The size of pockets. I wasn't very amused. 'You look I mean on how small they can get, not how large.

"Ah. Serious talk. Er... making the buttons big enough for fingers to push them.

"Right! Whenever you want to end up with it all starts here. People. And people are pretty big in mechanical terms. Billions of cells. Millions maybe. I forget. Compared to a single virus, that's huge.

Oliver looked at me thoughtfully. Have you ever noticed how similar viruses are to tiny robots?" he asked. I remember a picture of a bacteriophage that looked rather like a lunar lander, with a kind of syringe on its tip, up the middle. And the flagella of bacteria are like Archimedean screws running on circular bearings."

"But nobody builds a virus! We can't even synthesize one of any real complexity!" Then I realized we had strayed from the point. Anyway, what I mean is to get down 120

to microbes, in stages—your suggestion—involves too long a chain of command. So the errors accumulate too much.

Oliver's eyes glared over completely. For a moment I thought it was the ale. Then he slammed his mug down on the counter.

"I'll just have to find a way to stop them from accumulating," he said.

I didn't see Oliver again for a month, though I was in the Bristol area twice during that time. Decal Electronics seems to have a finger in every pie from laser-powered lasers to particle beam benders, and Oliver often gets dragged halfway across the world on business with only ten minutes' notice.

The third occasion, I phoned from Cardiff, and Oliver was back in circulation. We agreed to meet at the Tall Ship. He breezed in with a lolly-looking cardboard life under one arm, hauled me off into a corner, and showed an engineering diagram in front of me. It looked like a cross between a mechanical grab and a helicopter, and I said as much. He hastened to explain.

It's the preliminary blueprint for the Oliver Gurney Reduplicating Engine," he said proudly.

Reduplicating? Pontmain word. Cross between reduping and duplicating.

Engine? Makes for a better acronym: OGRE.

Oh. I asked how it worked. He edged closer in conspiratorial fashion and I edged away and we both moved some two feet along the seat, until I was wedged into the corner. Basically, he said, it's a modification of one of the standard replicating systems.

For once I understood what he was talking about. "You mean that thing at MIT that builds copies of itself?"

Yes. The Japanese have one, too, and the Russians have one, too, and the Americans have one, too. But that relies on a supply of spare parts, and a stock of magnetic cards to copy the program on.

He held up both hands as if to ward off the flow of words. Mine doesn't.

There are times when it pays to listen to Oliver carefully. He's very bright, but also a little sloppy, and about one crazy idea in twenty actually works. But when it does, it makes up for the nineteen others. I guess that's how Decal Electronics sees it, too.

Mine makes its own spare parts out of any material that comes to hand. Metal, mostly, and bits of plastic. And when it

builds a copy of itself, it does it on one tenth scale!"

"Clever idea, Oliver," I said. "You make one big one, and that makes a medium-sized one, and that makes a small one, and that makes an even smaller one, but it won't work.

Have you ever tried to tell a mother that her newborn offspring resembles an apoplectic capuchin monkey? He actually snarled at me. Why not?"

The smaller it gets, the more the molecular structure of the material changes in relation to the size of the components. You can't shrink atoms, Oliver.

Thank God. I thought, maybe you'd thought of an obstacle I'd missed. I've programmed it to modify the design as it shrinks in size. This involved other modifications, too. It was rather complicated, but he seemed to have it all worked out. The process had to stop at some point anyway, and he had programmed the machine to stop reproducing when it had reached macromolecular size.

But what about the error buildup?"

There isn't one. I've arranged it so that the machine corrects its own structure on the basis of its internal programs. And those are just copied. With a good error-correcting code, there's no difficulty.

I need another tack. It looks very complicated. Won't the first stage be rather big?"

Not with off the shelf components. About the size of a Helibag Experience?"

Not as much as you'd think. You'll be glad you invested in this idea.

I'm sure I—What did you say?"

He clutched at my arm, perhaps to stop me from getting away. It's a money spinner, Jonathan! Imagine it: a robot no larger than a bacterium! It'll be the biggest thing since the microchip!

I think you mean smallest, Oliver. Now look, I've got better things to do with my money than—

Oh, come on! All I need is three hundred pounds! I can get a lot of the stuff out of my research budget at Decal, and I've got a few quid put away for a rainy day myself, but I'm three hundred short!

Get a bank loan.

Umm. Well, you remember how I got an overdraft to finance that development project for microwave socks to keep feet warm in cold weather. National Westminster caught a bit of a cold on that one.

Say no more, I get the picture. Anyway, I don't have—

You'll regret it if you refuse. Think of the possibilities! And you'll have a stake in the ground floor. Once it takes off—

Oily, it's a funny ground floor that can take off with a stake in it. It's just— On the other hand, maybe he was right. It was a small enough risk, and the returns might be huge.

"All right. I'll forgo the new hall carpet. Half share?"

"Of course!"

He'd said that too quickly. "Hang on! I want half shares in the profits. I absolutely refuse to accept responsibility if anything goes wrong!"

"Don't! A check will do fine. Payable to Oliver B. Gurney. Lovely!"

He tucked it into his wallet. "Painless, wasn't it?"

So far I'll answer that when the analgesic effect of the alcohol wears off.

Decal Labs was on the outskirts of Bristol, in an old country house in the village of Mendertrey, not far from Bristol Parkway railway station. The building's exterior is much as it was two hundred years ago, but the inside has been ripped out and totally rebuilt.

Oliver had built OGRE in the basement. I was astonished at how quickly he had managed it. He explained to me that once the design was specified, the construction was easily performed by using a standard assembly robot and a critical free quasi-bootstrap technique.

Concorted himself?

But I had to admit it was impressive. It just about filled the basement. The bulk was a lot of electronic modules, with a few induction motors and belt drives. Around this was a kind of machine tool assembly line, wound from top to bottom in a spiral. Right on the top was a hopper, with a mechanical grab arm. The whole thing was mounted on caterpillar tracks, and if you looked carefully, you could see a retractable hook in each segment of track.

Apparently the hooks were for climbing up things.

Where's the barn door, Oily?

Er? Oh, no, this one stays put. The tracks are for later generations to scavenge for materials. I put them on this one only to see how they'd look.

And where does this one get the materials it needs?

He pointed. Those garbage cans over there. The next generation uses these little bins here, and later generations cannibalize previous ones.

"Who? Reviewing the ancient art of metaphysics? But isn't it rather costly to let them eat up all that machinery?"

"They won't eat much. There's only one machine in each generation. I suppose they might bite a few chunks out of Mama's caterpillars. The scavenging has to be fairly efficient for the process to stand any chance of working at all. Frankly, I'm not sure I could stop the babies from eating Mama if I wanted to. You see, to do that, they have to recognize who Mama is, and that means a lot of extra programming, memory and such."

But in any case— he broke off, seemingly a little embarrassed. "Well, the big machine is mostly made up out of Hong Kong copies bought at knockdown prices on the black market. But don't let IBM know, or they'll cancel all our service contracts."

I looked around me. A thick cable ran from a plug on the wall. Where do the offspring get their power from?

"There I cheated. The second, third and fourth generations use batteries. After that, they get small enough to rely on solar power. By the seventh generation there's enough energy in starlight."

Much more to do? I asked.

"None. Just some final programming. Hang on ten minutes, and I'll have it done."

So I hung on. It was almost certainly the biggest mistake of my life, because it made Oily rush the programming job and not check it properly. Anyway he rattled away at a keyboard in the corner for a while, then grabbed the magnetic programming card and shoved it into a narrow slot in the side of OGRE. I first generation match.

He threw the switch.

Progress was pretty slow to begin with. "It should take about three days," Oliver said. But that time shrinks as the machines get smaller. Everything goes by a factor of ten at first. The next size takes about seven hours, then forty minutes, then four minutes and so on, and so forth. The whole process drops off eventually when it gets down to milliseconds, mind you.

It may have been slow, but I was fascinated. Oily is a skillful engineer, and OGRE was functioning smoothly, as far as I could tell. Already a kind of chaos had been assembled, and as it began to descend the helix it acquired extra parts.

I rearranged all my work schedules to keep me in the Bristol area for the next few days, but my mind was only half on the job. Every spare moment I spent over in Men-

derby, seeing how OGRE was progressing. And the more I watched it, the more the clanking of metallic scrap came to resemble the cheerful clinking of coin. It really looked as if Oliver had tapped the mother lode this time.

On the evening of the third day a miniature OGRE, about a foot long, duly rolled off the ramp at the end of the assembly line. It whirled across the floor and began to rummage happily around in one of the smaller bins. Within a quarter of an hour a sub-OGRE had begun its spiral descent.

Suddenly I truly believed, not just an intellectual acceptance, but a warm glow in the gut. It was overwhelming. "My God, Oliver! Look at that thing! It's building inch-long robots!"

"If you think that's astonishing, wait a few generations more. You'll need a microscope to see anything at all."

We stared at it. Motherhood must be something like this. The tiny scraps of junk metal went 'tinkle-tinkle-tinkle'. Oliver had a sloppy smile on his face. "Oh look," I said. "It's feeding." We looked at each other and we both burst out laughing.

You'll be checking it for colic next, he said. "Wake up, man, it's just a machine! I've got a better idea than just standing around here!"

"Oh?"

The Carpenter's Arms, at Portishead. Prawn cocktails and jugged hare. We left hurriedly.

We arrived home in a taxi, well after midnight, as plastered as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We didn't look into the basement at Decal Labs until midmorning the next day, when Oily drove us over.

OGRE was a total wreck.

At first we thought that someone had vandalized it. Then I suggested to Oliver that it had perhaps fallen to bits of its own accord, and he lost his temper. Only when he felt something scamper up his leg did he stop shouting at me. He thought it was a spider and he hates spiders.

It was a fourth-generation OGRE, about a tenth of an inch across.

It seemed to be trying to eat his belt buckle.

"Oliver, I said, 'what's that funny rasping noise?' We listened. Besides the rasping, there were faint clanks and clicks and hums, and behind them all a persistent background whine, like a swarmed swarm of mosquitoes.

"It's coming from OGRE," he said. He

bent down to take a closer look. Get me a magnifying glass!

Where?

Look in the living cabinet under M¹. I found it and passed it to him. He hunched up his torso, squatted on his haunches, and peered through it at the wreckage.

Oh my God! he said. Look!

I did.

The OGRE mismatch was crawling with sub-sub-sub-closter OGREs. Like a rotten cheese afflicted with mites. They were dismembering it. Cockroach-sized OGRElets were hacking Mama to pieces with teeny-weeny chain saws on retractable arms, gouging chunks out of her plating with their little laser cutters, and shipping the insulating plastic off her wiring to melt it down for their own use. And as they pursued their gruesome task, even tinier OGRElets swarmed over them, sawing and rasping and hacking so fast that all you could see was a blur. The larger OGREs were trying frantically to repair themselves, and I saw several of them sweeping up piles of the smaller ones with devices resembling dust pans and pouring them into their own hop-pers. It wasn't doing them much good. The tiny OGREs were eating the hoppers faster than the big ones could digest them.

It was a jungle in there.

It looked as if nothing could possibly survive. But the smaller OGREs reproduced so much faster that they had a considerable advantage. Their numbers were obviously increasing.

I handed the magnifying glass back. Its metal rim was dull and pitted. They'd started on that.

I don't understand, said Oliver. There ought to be only one machine in each generation. I wonder whether. Suddenly he thrust his hand into the wreckage and began groping around. It should be—ger-off! He held it up. He extracted a magnetic card, mostly intact, although it looked as if mice had been at it around the edges. They don't need much plastic, fortunately, he said. He shoved the card into his terminal and switched on.

There was a shower of sparks and the terminal collapsed. They'd started to scavenge that, too.

There were many more terminals in the Decal labs, and we tried one three floors up. It worked. Presumably the OGREs hadn't yet moved that far ahead. Oliver ran through the program ratings and soon found his mistake. Damn! I mispunched the card for OGRE fertility factor!

Which does what?

Controls the rate of numbers in successive generations. It should have been set at 1, to keep just one machine at each stage. I seem to have put an extra zero on the end.

You loon.

Well, it was only a little mistake.

Surely. But as a result, we got ten times as many OGREs at each stage?

Yes.

Oliver, you've got a population explosion on your hands. Lord knows how much damage these things will do!

Now don't get upset. It isn't as bad as you think. I put in a stop code at macromolecular size, remember? Once they reach that generation, they stop reproducing and switch off. They die out. The damage area shouldn't be too big.

Oh. Wait a minute though. Shouldn't we have reached that stage by now? What's the formula for summing a geometric progression?

You've forgotten forgetting time. That's a limiting factor, and it's random. It will slow them down a bit. We just have to wait.

We waited. We made occasional forays down the stairs. The activity continued unabated. In fact, it seemed to grow. Finally I suggested we take another look at the program.

Oliver had been using a high-level language that accepts commands in English—Analog English—and, instead of telling it to stop reproducing, he'd told it to stop reducing.

You know what you've built? I said.

He groaned.

A rapid-breeding artificial virus. One that eats itself.

Our first thought was to call the police, but the phone didn't work. None of the phones worked. The internal telephone exchange was in the basement.

The car wouldn't start, not surprisingly for something that looks like Shilton cheese. So we departed on foot. It was raining in torrents.

Half a mile down the road, the sole of my left shoe fell off. They'd eaten the nails. Oliver was having trouble with his, too.

This is terrible! I exclaimed.

Too right! It hasn't rained like this since—

I mean your bloody virus! Communications will fail, machines will break down, there'll be no transport. TV stations will go off the air, and people will die of boredom! Cars will crumble to dust! Plastic cutlery

from highway service stations will change hands for inflated sums! It will be the End of Civilization as We Know It.

You're overreacting! It can't come to that yet!

No, but it will. I said desolately. "This is occurred to you that we're both carriers of the disease? The virus must be all over our clothing, to judge by the damage it's doing to it! Where are we going anyway? All we'll do is spread the infection everywhere!"

Oliver grabbed me by the shoulders. What else can we do? We have to warn people somehow! Now shut up, keep walking, and let me think!

Eventually we managed to hitch a lift into Bristol. I spent the ride waiting for the car to fall apart, but it seemed unaffected. I could only assume that the virus had not in fact been carried on our clothing, but for the life of me I couldn't see how that was possible. The car dropped us at the street corner near Oliver's flat. The door key was a bit mangled, but it held together enough to let us in. Oliver headed for the telephone.

Half an hour later he put it down. (Oh! I don't want to have to go through anything like that again!)

What did you do?

I called the managing director of Decal Electronics and put the position to him. He'd agreed to inform the authorities that there has been a sudden and inexplicable incidence of rapid corrosion in the vicinity of North Bristol, resembling an epidemic. Cause as yet unknown.

But—

But we can reveal the cause only by admitting it's all our fault, and neither you nor I nor Decal Labs would want that. Nor does it do any harm, because Decal will spearhead the investigation.

I know the managing director. He's a tough bird. It's possible to get out of this with our necks intact, he'll do it.

Fine. But what if the disease just keeps spreading? It really will be the end of civilization, Oh!

He looked glumly at his fingernails. I know. But there's still hope. Have you noticed anything?

Like what?

Well, for instance, the lights are still working. So was the phone when I put it down. He switched on the hi-fi. It was working, too.

So it hasn't reached here yet.

No, but we have. Something killed off the OGRE virus particles on our clothes. I

noticed on the way here that the congestion seemed to have stopped. I only wish I knew why!

City and I did as we'd been told. We stayed put. And we had never felt so useless in our lives. We drank coffee and played records and kept an eye on the TV for new bulletins: all the time half-expecting the propagator to suffer a meltdown and the hi-fi and TV to go on the blink.

It was an eye-opening experience for anyone with a fond belief in the openness of British government. The world was about to go to a halt, and there was not one word on TV or radio to let the public know.

There was a few hints, though. Like an item about a pub in Lennards Green (just down the road from Menderby) whose beer kegs had suddenly decided they preferred to look like colanders, spraying the clientele with cold lager. City groaned aloud—at the waste, I suspect. And something horrible had happened to the railway lines near Bristol, but they weren't saying what.

Every so often we got an updated report on the true state of affairs: over the telephone. For the first twenty-four hours the epidemic advanced eastward along a narrow front, until it had affected an area about fifteen miles long and two broad. We plotted its progress on a map, with pins. It was heading straight for Swindon, an important railway junction, a center for heavy industry with a population of one hundred thousand. So far it had passed only through rural areas, but this would be orders of magnitude worse.

Then the wind changed, and it turned slightly northward, just enough to miss Swindon. But any relief we felt was short-lived. Thirty miles along the Thames Valley, right in its path, was Oxford.

The advancing front had narrowed again, to less than a mile. There were fewer damage reports coming in, but it's a very rural area, and so it was hard to tell whether that was significant.

We waited. It was torture.

The phone rang. City beamed to me to stay a nose. He didn't say anything, he just stood there with a funny look on his face, shaking his head slowly from side to side. It didn't look very encouraging.

He put the telephone down. He looked stunned.

Don't tell me, I said. Oxford is in ruins. The British Leyland plant at Cowley is a scrap heap. All the university computers are wrecked, and they're suing Decal for

every penny they've—

No, he said. Not yet anyway. Oxford hasn't suffered any damage yet. The plague seems to have stopped spreading somewhere between Hampton and Kingston Bagpuzze.

Why? Has the wind dropped?

No, it's blowing a gale. I just can't understand it.

Perhaps it's voodoo.

Er?

I waved vaguely toward the map. All those pins we've stuck into it have killed it.

The area of active infection began to shrink. When forty-eight hours reports had ceased altogether.

Something had wiped out Oliver's artificial virus. But we still had no idea what had really happened, or even whether it would stay wiped out. Oliver was whisked off to Decal's Manchester branch to assist the inquiries, and I was patting on the head and sent home. I drove back to Coventry with my fingers crossed and took a detour east of Oxford, just in case.

There was never even the barest hint of a whisper in the newspapers, not a peepscall as my father used to say, but from various sources I pieced together a fair picture. The plague of the metal eaters had confined itself to a region of some fifty square miles, largely open fields, and most of the damage was superficial. It had died out before anything really serious happened.

The newspapers knew something odd had occurred, of course. But they'd been fed some tale about national security, and the government had slapped a C notice on the story. So they had shut up.

By the time I managed to get in touch with Oliver again, things were pretty much back to normal, but he looked distinctly subdued, even a shade thinner than his usual degree of rotundity, and I told him so. I'm surprised you aren't in jail, I added.

So am I. But the thing that stopped the plague also destroyed the evidence. It's been officially classified as a natural disaster. Of course, Decal Labs chained the committee that made the final report. That may have had something to do with it.

They sacked you, of course. I think I might be able to wangle you a job in—

Er? Good Lord, not Decal? got a huge contract for reconstruction work?

There just ain't no such thing as justice in this cruel world no more, Oliver, please the suspense is agony. What did stop the plague from taking over the entire globe?

Cheap Hong Kong copies? he hissed from the corner of his mouth.

Come again?

Those, and our worthy British climate. Stop being obscure. Very well, it was rust. Rust?

Exactly. It's a good job you're such a skunk, only prepared to invest a pittance in my sound business ventures. The prototype OGRE was made of cheap steel. Not too many generations down, the components got so small that they rusted away faster than new ones got built.

I said your inability to scale the molecular structure would cause trouble! It's precious hard to make a layer of paint less than one molecule thick. And that's the last time I'll invest a penny in one of your sound business ventures, you ungrateful—

Oh, hold on there! I know exactly what went wrong! You have to expect a few leeching troubles! We can have another go now, using Japanese equipment in stainless steel casings. His voice trailed off.

Never! Oliver Boswell Gurney, I refuse! "Oh, perhaps you're right, OGRE had too many bugs."

You can say that again!

Anyway Decal Labs is sending me off to Paris for a few months. To recuperate. Probably the real reason is to get me out of the country. Thus I won't see you for a bit. Can I buy you a pint before I go?

No thanks.

No?

I'll have a small whiskey. A helping.

So that was the end of Oliver's metal-eating virus. It rusted away. We should've known. The bodywork always goes first. Sort seems.

But, since Oliver left, I've never been quite convinced. You see, viruses can mutate. Suppose one of the nth-generation OGREs misread its own program and built its offspring out of gold, or platinum, or stainless steel. Or suppose one learned to copy anything. When the rust killed off the plague, it would leave a few members of a rust-resistant strain.

I'm probably worrying needlessly.

If only Oliver hadn't gone to Paris, the idea would never have entered my head.

You see, there was a report on television this evening.

The Eiffel Tower just fell down.

The French authorities have attributed it to metal fatigue.

I hope they're right.



Alvin Menlar's newest lady friend was beautiful, graceful, and perfect on the dance floor—she was programmed that way

LAST WALTZ

BY WARREN BROWN

Alvin Menlar loved toys. He loved them because he loved playing. Homo Ludens was his motto, and though it had managed to acquire a vast and interplanetary fortune. Since he first held a toy rocket in his hands as a child, he had dreamed of having space and planets to play with. He became one of the first great space entrepreneurs. His companies mined the moon and farmed Mars. His satellites beamed lasered solar power to an earth made affluent and peaceful by cheap and abundant energy.

He would never have called himself a cruel man, and certainly not a tyrannical one. He did not even think of himself as a manipulator. As far as he was concerned, he was simply a player better than most other players. He thought humans were the best game of all, for they were not only players but also pieces in the game. Morality was a word he occasionally found a place for in crossword puzzles. Beyond such use,

morality itself was meaningless to him.

His latest toy sat facing him across a table of Onirial pottum, upon which sat two glasses of pure crystal, filled with rare wine. She was tall and graceful, with a flawless Grecian face and eyes an emerald green set off by the pale yellow cascade of her curly hair. Her dress was robe silk, and it was diaphanous.

Menlar was dressed in white as something between mandarin and sheikh. He wore a fabulous jeweled, curved dagger. With his close-cropped, curly white hair and pale blue eyes, he most resembled some cruel and haughty prince of an ancient and decadent civilization. He was pleased with the effect he thought it rather playful. He hoped it would make an impression on Margret when she came. And she would come if he had moved correctly.

As if to confirm the rightness of his move, a soft chime sounded through the penthouse, followed by Margret's voice asking permission to come up. He rose

PAINTING BY WOLFGANG HUTTER

and extended his hand to his beautiful companion who stood by attentively.

Would you get that, love? Take my hand. She took his hand without replying and rose gracefully. Sweeping past him with a whisper of silk, she went to the elevator door and placed her palm on the access-permission plate. The machinery acknowledged her palm-print code with a soft whirr, and the floor indicator showed that the elevator was starting up. It would take nearly a minute to ascend the two hundred floors to the penthouse.

Menlar placed his palm at his throat as he watched the floor indicator's soft lights. He had noticed a slight distortion in his speech a moment before and wondered whether the speech synthesizer that made up for his birth-defective vocal cords was malfunctioning. He thought of going to his bedroom for the spare, but he dismissed the idea because he wanted to be present when the elevator doors opened. It would be the playful thing to do.

"Smile at our visitor when she steps out of the elevator," he said to his beautiful companion. "Hold out your hand and wish her a good evening."

The woman regarded him for a second with bright emerald eyes and then turned slowly toward the ornate mosaic of the elevator doors. The floor indicator lit its last light. The guest had arrived. The doors hissed open, and Margret Lewis stepped into the room. Menlar's companion held out her hand to the new arrival. "Good evening," she said.

Margret reached out for the offered hand, but she turned toward Menlar as if to speak to him. In that brief moment her eyes adjusted to the subdued light of the penthouse alcove and she saw she was shaking hands with herself. She pulled back her hand as if it had been burned. Slapping backward, she found herself against the elevator doors. Menlar heard her quick intake of breath and laughed. Margret stared at the android; the android stared back.

Regaining her composure, she turned to her host. Her eyes narrowed. "What the hell is this, Alvin? Another sick game?"

"Why, Margret, Menlar asked, "that's no way to speak to your employer."

"Employer," she hissed.

He took her arm. "Yes, well, that's one of the matters I called you here to discuss: your resignation."

She pulled her arm away. "So this is one of your jokes. I should have known you were lying when you called to say Hams was in

some kind of trouble. I'm leaving." She turned and started toward the elevator.

Stop her, Menlar ordered the android.

Faster than a human could have moved the automaton's arm shot out to bar the way. Margret threw herself against it. She was a strong woman, but the arm that blocked her real might have been stone. Menlar thought the sight of Margret trying to get past Margret was worth the high price of his new toy.

"I'd say you're beside yourself," sweet-heart, he chuckled.

Seeing escape was hopeless, the woman turned to face him again.

"You won't get away with this," she spat, her voice burning with anger.

"Get away with what?" Menlar replied softly. "You're free to leave. I just thought you might be interested to know what's in store for your lover."

Margret froze.

Let her pass, he ordered the android whose arm still paralyzed the floor. The arm lowered. Menlar shook his head. She's beautiful, but so literal. No real intelligence. Not like you, Margret.

Margret stared at him, unmoving.

Well, aren't you going? he said.

"What have you done?" she asked, ignoring his question, an edge of panic in her voice. "Where's Hams?"

"Would you like to come in and talk about it?" Menlar inquired, smiling. "We can have a drink for old times' sake."

Her shoulders drooped. The life seemed to go out of her. Menlar swept his arm to ward the living room in an expansive gesture of hospitality. She followed him in numbly.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" she whispered.

Because the thought of you alone is a tragic one, Menlar replied.

"I was always alone with you," she shot back, standing stiffly as he sealed himself in a deep sofa chair.

"And I thought you cared for me once," he said in a voice filled with exaggerated hurt.

"What have you done to Hams?" she demanded.

He's one of my best engineers. Why should I do anything to him?

But you said

I didn't say. I asked. I asked you 4 you wanted to know what's in store for him.

Menlar watched the play of emotions on her face: indecision, fear for her lover, anger. It was a cool anger. Menlar liked that he had always appreciated her control.

"I hate you," she said flatly.

"I don't hold that against you. Many people do."

"You can't play any more games with me. I'm leaving. Hams is leaving. There are plenty of positions for good engineers."

"With good work records," he said smoothly.

Try to blackmail us. That would be just like a recommendation to some of your competitors.

Perhaps true. My competitors do want honest people, though.

What do you mean?

Simply that your lover, Hams, had paid for his research-and-development account rather thickly.

You bastards. You wouldn't date.

I can make it appear that he's stolen quite a lot from me.

You'll never manage a frame-up like that.

I have proof in my safe, Menlar said, pointing to an ornate wooden cube. In voices receipts that sort of thing.

You're a monster.

I'm a player. And I keep what I've won. You're in this case.

What do you want?

I want you at work bright and early every day, and here afterwards every night, until I say otherwise.

What about Hams?

He can do as he pleases. It's you I want.

You can't intimidate him.

You misunderstand me, Margret. Menlar stood up. "I'm not trying to intimidate anyone. I've simply made a move. You may reply to it in any way you choose."

Margret's eyes flicked to the camouflage safe, then back to Menlar. He caught the furtive movement.

The safe is durable, ten centimeters thick with a self-powered tamper alarm beamed straight to police central. It's molded to the floor and palm-keyed to one person only. The alarm will sound at anyone else's imprint. So think before you act, Margret.

Margret's hand moved smoothly into the pocket of her business suit. Menlar smiled. He knew what she was reaching for; he had given it to her.

Before you try to coerce me with that elegant little weapon you carry. I think you should know that I sent my palm that keys the safe.

Her hand came out of her pocket empty. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I mean only someone very close to me can open that safe. Out

that person to open it and you will see whatever is inside of it.

"You have other faked records hidden somewhere."

He shook his head.
"You'd make up others."

"Ah, no. Scott's honor. This is my only play against Harris."

Does that mean there's one against me?

Menlar liked her quickness. It made for a good game.

Just something in reserve. He handed her a holograph viewer. Here's a hint: you may have missed. You never much liked the blue scene.

Margret looked through the eyepiece for a few seconds, gasped and flung the viewer at Menlar, who sidestepped adroitly.

"Where did you get that hint? I've never done."

"What's the matter? Not for public consumption? He grinned. "The master is in the safe."

She stared at him speechlessly, hate in her eyes.

"It's a little something your twin participated in. He swung his hand toward the android standing silent and beautiful beside the elevator. She even dances as well as you. He beckoned to the android and opened his mouth. No sound came out. He tapped the jeweled disk of the speech synthesizer at his throat. Technical difficulties, he chuckled distortedly. Come here, he decreed the android, which silently approached.

Menlar gave a waltz on the penthouse's sound system.

Will you have the first dance? He bowed to Margret.

Go to hell.

Then perhaps the second. He smiled at the android as it joined him. "Waltz with me," he ordered the machine. "Margret has something to decide."

The man and the machine were soon gliding around the polished wood floor before the tall windows that formed one wall of the penthouse. It was a Cinderella scene: the gallant handsome prince and his breathtakingly beautiful love dancing in a magic ballroom high above the lights of the city. Margret, ignored by both of them, watched with icy eyes.

You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you? Menlar sang out over the music as he and the counterfeiter Margret swept by to Wences time. "But your Harris would be blamed." The music carried them to the far

corner of the spacious room. Embracing slowly, he cried, and the android put its arms tightly around him. "You see," he shouted as a great swell of music swept them past Margret again, "your loyal twin would never let me go."

His voice was distorted by the faulty synthesizer. It had a devilish, wavering ring. Margret turned her back on the scene. Menlar watched her as he whirled across the floor in the android's embrace. The waltz merged into another and still she kept her back to him and his useless partner. He knew at that moment he had won. To be sure, he'd have to be on his guard forever after. But what was the game without excitement? As that distressing thought crossed his mind, Margret turned to look at him. "You win," she shouted over the music. "You win, damn you!"

Menlar opened his mouth to say, Of course, but nothing came out. He caught a puzzled look on Margret's face as he and the android swept by her without missing a beat.

You win, I said, she screamed out. Stop that obscene dancing.

Menlar opened his mouth to command the android to stop and release him, but nothing came out. Damn synthesizer, he thought, trying to get his hand to his throat to tap the disk. But the android's embrace held him too closely. A stab of fear shot through him as the dance went on. He gave a mighty wrench of his body; the dance barely faltered. A new waltz merged with the fading of the old one. "The music," he silently mouthed to Margret, "you must stop the music."

He saw her step toward the sound-system controls. Her hand hesitated over them. Then her eyes locked with his, and she suddenly pulled her hand away. Instead of working the controls, she angled toward the dancers, matching the motion of the waltz.

Her arm shot out, and he felt her fingers around the disk at his throat. With a mighty yank, she savagely ripped the synthesizer from his neck.

The waltz whirled him around, and he lost sight of her momentarily. When the android swung him back, he saw she had opened the wooden cabinet enclosing the safe. The dull black dented surface had no visible hinges, only the gray square of the palm-key plate. Margret stood in front of the safe. She held the powerful laser steadily in both her hands.

Five it, Menlar thought as the android

swung him breathlessly around, still bing the police.

But she lowered the weapon and stood through a whole waltz, then another, then another. Menlar's legs were starting to cramp. A haze of burning sweat filled his eyes. Five it, he thought desperately. Five it, five it.

The android swung him to the far end of the room. He tripped and the automaton's foot crashed down indifferently on his. He felt his bones snap, and red pain flashed behind his eyes. They clamped closer to Margret. She had put the laser away and was very close to the safe; her palm held out tentatively.

She can't have guessed who it opens for, he thought. His injured foot tripped him up, and the beautiful machine trod on it. A spasm of nausea hit him with the pain, and he felt vomit rising in his throat. Choking it down, he swung around just in time to see Margret's palm press firmly against the key plate of the safe. The door clicked open. He glimpsed her carefully examining the contents, putting them in her handbag. Then he was yanked around again and waited toward the glass wall. The lights of the city whirled dizzily below. The music played on.

He began to beat at the android, pounding his fists into the resilient plastic/kelk, pounding and pounding until his hands were bruised and bleeding from impacting the dented skeleton beneath the almost human skin. He tried to let himself fall into the encircling arms to rest. But his smashed foot was pummeled again, and he pulled himself up with his bloody hands and tried desperately to keep time with the infernal waltz.

Through a haze of pain he saw that Margret was standing over the music controls, watching him and her twin intently. She can't go through with it, he thought.

As her hand went down to the controls, he was pulled smoothly around by the robot. He felt a surge of strength in the thought of release and the thought of re-match. No one beats me twice, he thought. Swinging around, he saw that Margret was still at the music controls. Stupid for an engineer, he thought in pain. Can't even work it. The green button he mouthed soundlessly. Then he was dragged again across the room.

When the android turned him once more in the dance, he saw that Margret was gone. When he heard the music speeding up, he opened his mouth and tried to scream.

GOD IS AN IRON

*She had lived a life of unending pain,
so it was only natural that her method of committing
suicide would be through pleasure*

BY SPIDER ROBINSON

I smelled her before I saw her. Even so, the first sight of her was shocking.

She was sitting in a tan plastic sun-faced armchair, the kind where the front comes up as the back goes down. It was back as far as it would go. It was placed beside the large living-room window whose curtains were drawn. A plastic black table next to it held a digital clock, a dozen unopened packages of Peter Jackson cigarettes, a glass jar full of paces of matches, an empty ashtray, a full vial of cocaine, and a lamp with a bulb of at least 150 watts. It illuminated her with brutal clarity.

She was naked. Her skin was the color of vanilla pudding. Her hair was in rats, her nails unpainted and untended, some overlong and some broken. There was dust on her. She sat in a ghoulish sludge of feces and urine. Gned vomit was caked on her chin and between her breasts and down her abs to the chair.

These were only part of what I had smelled. The predominant odor was of flesh-baked bread. It is the smell of a person who is starving to death. The combined effluvia had prepared me to find a senior citizen, paralyzed by a stroke or some such ous.

I judged her to be about twenty-five years old.

I moved to where she could see me, and she did not see me. That was probably just as well, because I had just seen the two most horrible things. The first was the smile. They say that when the bomb went off at Hiroshima, some people's shadows were baked onto walls by it. I think that smile got baked on the surface of my brain in much the same way. I don't want to talk about that smile.

The second most horrible thing was the one that explained all the rest. From

where I now stood I could see a triple socket in the wall beneath the window. Into it were plugged the lamp, the clock, and her.

I knew about wireheading, of course—I had lost a couple of acquaintances and one friend to the juke. But I had never seen a wirehead. It is by definition a solitary won, and all the public usually gets to see is a shuddered figure being carried out to the wagon.

The transformer lay on the floor beside the chair where it had been dropped. The switch was on, and the timer had been jiggled so that instead of providing one five- or ten- or fifteen-second jolt per hour it allowed continuous flow. That timer is required by law on all juke rigs sold, and you need special tools to defeat it. Say, a nail file. The input cord was long, fell in crazy coils from the wall socket. The output cord disappeared beneath the chair, but I knew where it ended. It ended in the tangled snarl of her hair at the crown of her head, ended in a mini-plug. The plug was snapped into a jack surgically implanted in her skull, and from the jack tery was snaked their way through the wet jelly to the hypothalamus, to the specific place in the medial forebrain bundle where the major pleasure center of her brain was located. She had sat there in total transcendence ecstasy for at least five days.

I moved. Finally, I moved closer which surprised me. She saw me now, and, impossibly, the smile became a bit wider. I was marvelous. I was captivating. I was her perfect lover. I could not look at the smile, a small plastic tube ran from one corner of the smile and my eyes followed it gratefully. It was held in place by small bits of surgical tape at her jaw, neck, and shoulder, and from there it ran in a lacy

curve to the big fifty-liter water cooler bottle on the floor. She had plainly meant her suicide to last. She had arranged to die of hunger rather than thirst, which would have been quicker. She could take a drink when she happened to think of it, and I like to get what the hell.

My intention must have showed on my face, and I think she even understood it—the smile began to fade. That decided me. I moved before she could force her neglected body to react, whipped the plug out of the wall and stepped back warily.

Her body did not go rigid as if galvanized. It had already been so for many days. What it did was the exact opposite, and the effect was just as striking. She seemed to shrink. Her eyes slammed shut. She slumped. Well, I thought, if it be a long day and night before she can move a voluntary muscle again, and then she hit me before I knew she had left the chair, breaking my nose with the heel of one fist and bouncing the other off the side of my head. We cannoned off each other and I managed to keep on my feet; she whirled and grabbed the lamp. Its cord was stapled to the floor and would not yield, so she set her feet and yanked and it snapped off clean at the base. In total darkness she raised the lamp on high and came to me, and I lunged inside the arc of her swing and punched her in the solar plexus. She said guff! and went down.

I staggered to a couch and sat down and felt my nose and I bled.

I don't think I was out very long. The blood tasted fresh. I woke with a sense of terrible urgency. It took me a while to work out why. What someone has been simultaneously starved and unceasingly

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stimulated for days on end, it is not the best idea in the world to depress that someone's respiratory center. I lurch to my feet.

It was not completely dark; there was a moon somewhere out there. She lay on her back, arms at her sides, perfectly relaxed. Her ribs rose and fell in great slow sweeps. A pulse showed strongly at her throat. As I knelt beside her, she began to snore deeply and rhythmically.

I had time for second thoughts now. It seemed incredible that my impulsive action had not killed her. Perhaps that had been my subconscious intent. Five days of veneering alone should have killed her, let alone sudden cold turkey.

I probed in the tangle of hair, found the empty sack. The hair around it was dry. If she hadn't torn the skin in yanking herself loose, I was unlikely that she had sustained any more serious damage within. I continued probing, found no soft places on the skull. Her forehead felt cool and sticky to my hand. The local smell was overpowering the baking bread now, sourly fresh.

There was no pain in my head yet, but it felt immense and pulsing. I did not want to touch it, or to think about it. My shirt was soaked with blood. I tossed it into a corner. I took everything I had to lift her. She was unnaturally heavy, and I have carried drunks and corpses. There was a hall off the living room, and all halls lead to a bathroom. I headed that way in a clumsy staggering trot, and just as I reached the deeper darkness, with my pulse at its maximum, my nose woke up and began screaming. I nearly dropped her then and clapped my hands to my face; the temptation was overwhelming. Instead I whimpered like a dog and kept going. Childhood feeling: rummy nose you can't wipe. At each door I came to I teetered on one leg and kicked it open and the third one gave the right small-room acoustic tile echo. The light switch was where they almost always are. I rubbed it on with my shoulder and the room flooded with light.

Large aquamarine tub. Styrofoam recliner pillow at the head end, nonslip bottom. Aquamarine sink with ornate handles cluttered with toiletries and cigarette butts and broken shards of mirror from the medicine cabinet above. Aquamarine commode lid up and seat down. Brown throw rug expensive. Scale effort back in a corner. I made a massive effort and managed to set her reasonably gently in the tub. I adjusted her head, foisted the chinstrap. I held both feet away from the faucet until I had the

water adjusted and then left, with one hand on my nose and the other beating against my hip, in search of her liquor.

There was plenty to choose from. I found some Metaxa in the kitchen. I took great care not to bring it near my nose, sneaking it up on my mouth from below. It tasted like burning lighter fluid and made sweat spring out on my forehead. I found a roll of paper towels, and on my way back to the bathroom I used a great wad of them to swab most of the sludge off the chair and rug. There was a growing pool of water seeping from the plastic tube, and I stopped that. When I got back to the bathroom the water was lapping over her soaked body, and hostile tendrils were weaving up from beneath her. It took three menses before I was satisfied with the body. I found a hose and spray under the sink that mated with the tub's faucet, and that made the hair easy.

I had to dry her there, in the tub. There was only one towel, none too clean. I found a first aid spray that incorporated a good topical anesthetic, and I put it on the sores on her back and butt. I had located her bedroom on the way to the Metaxa. Wet hair slapped my arms as I carried her there. She seemed even heavier, as though she had become waterlogged. I eased the door shut behind me and tread the light-switch truck again, and it wasn't there. I moved forward into a footlocker and lost her and went down amid multiple crashes, putting all my attention into guarding my nose. She made no sound at all, not even a grunt.

The light switch turned out to be a pull chain over the bed. She was on her side, still breathing slow and deep. I wanted to punt her up onto the bed. My nose was a blossom of pain. I nearly couldn't lift her the third time. I was moaning with frustration by the time I had her on her left side on the king size mattress. It was a big brass four-poster bed, with satin sheets and pillowcases, all dirty. The blankets were shoved to the bottom. I choked her skull and pulse again, peeled up each eyelid and found uniform pupils. Her forehead and cheek still felt cool, so I covered her. Then I kicked the footlocker clear into the corner, turned out the light, and left her snoring.

Her vital papers and documents were in her night locker in a strongbox on the closet shelf. It was an expensive box, quite sturdy and proof against anything short of nuclear explosion. It had a combination lock with all of twenty-seven possible combinations. It was stuffed with papers. I laid

her life out on her desk like a losing hand of solitaire and studied it with a growing frustration.

Her name was Karen Shawitski, and she used the name Karyn Shaw, which I thought phony. She was twenty-two. Divorced her parents at fourteen, uncontested no-fault. Since then she had been, at various times, waitress, secretary to a lamp salesman, painter, free-lance typist, motor cycle mechanic, library assistant, and unlicensed masseuse. The most recent paycheck stub was from The Hard Corps, a massage parlor with a cut-rate reputation. It was dated eight months ago. Her bank balance combined with paraphernalia I'd found in the closet to tell me that she was currently self-employed as a footlocker cocaine dealer. The richness of the apartment and furnishings told me that she was a foolish one, even if the narcs missed her very shortly the IRS was going to come down on her like a ton of bricks. Perhaps subconsciously she had not expected to be around.

Nothing there. I kept digging. She had attended community college for one semester as an art major and dropped out failing. She had defaulted on a lease three years ago. She had wrecked a car once and been shafted by her insurance company. Three. Only one major trauma in recent years. A year and a half ago she had contracted out as host mother to a couple named Lon and Gord Smyth. It was a pretty good fee—she had good hips and the right rare blood type—but six months into the pregnancy they had caught her using tobacco and canceled the contract. She fought, but they had photographs. And better lawyers, naturally. She had to repay the advance and pay for the abortion, of course, and got soaked for court costs besides.

I didn't make sense. To show clean lungs at the physical, she had to have been off cigarettes for at least three to six months. Why backslide, with so much at stake? Like the minor traumas, I felt more like an effect than a cause. Self-destructive behavior. I kept looking.

Near the bottom I found something that looked promising. Both her parents had been killed in a car smash when she was eighteen. Their obituary was paper clipped to her father's will. It was one of the most extraordinary documents I've ever read. I could understand an angry father cutting off his only daughter without a dime. But what he had done was worse. Much worse.

Dammit, it didn't work either. So there su-

cides don't wait four years. And they don't use such a garish method either. I dwell on the tragedy. I decided it had to be either a very big and dangerous coke deal gone bad or a very repulsive lover. No, not a coke deal. They'd never have let her in her own apartment to die the way she wanted to. It could not be murder. Even the most unscrupulous wire surgeon needs an awake, consenting subject to place the wire correctly.

A lover then. I was relieved, pleased with my sagacity, and irritated as hell. I didn't know why. I chalked it up to my nose. It felt as though a large shark with rubber teeth was rhythmically biting it as hard as he could. I shoveled the papers back into the box, locked and replaced it, and went to the bathroom.

Her medicine cabinet would have impressed a pharmacist. She had lots of allergies. It took me five minutes to find aspirin. I took four. I picked the largest shard of mirror out of the sink, propped it on the septic tank, and sat down backward on the toilet. My nose was visibly displaced to the right and the swelling was just being so stolid. There was a box of Kleenex on the floor. I ripped it apart, took out all the tissues, and stuffed them into my mouth. Then I grabbed my nose with my right hand and tugged out and to the left, flushing the toilet simultaneously with my left hand. The flushing coincided with the scream, and my front tooth mat through the Kleenex. When I could see again, the nose looked straight and my breathing was unimpeded. I gingerly washed my face, and then hands and left. A moment later I returned, something had caught my eye. It was the glass-and-toothbrush holder. There was only one toothbrush in it. I looked through the medicine chest again and noticed the time that there was no shaving cream, no razor either manual or electric, no masculine toiletries of any kind. All the prescriptions were in her name and seemed perfectly legible.

I went thoughtfully to the kitchen, mixed myself a Preacher's Downfall by moonlight, and took it to her bedroom. The bedside clock said five. It is a match, moved the footlocker in front of an armchair, sat down and put my feet up. I sipped my drink and listened to her snore and watched her breathe in the feeble light of the clock. I decided to run through all the possibilities, and as I was formulating the first one, daylight cracked me hard in the nose.

My hands went up reflexively, and I poured my drink on my head and hurt my

nose more. I woke up hard in the best of times. She was still snoring. I nearly threw the empty glass at her.

It was just past noon now, light came strongly through the heavy curtains, illuminating so much mess and disorder that I could not decide whether she had trashed her bedroom herself or it had been tossed by a pro. I finally settled on the former. The armchair I'd slept on was intact. Or had the pro found what he wanted before he'd gotten that far?

I gave it up and went to make myself breakfast.

It took me an hour or two to clean up and aer out the living room. The cord and transformer went down the outside, along with most of the perished items from the fridge. The dishes took three full cycles for each load, a couple of hours all told. I passed the time vacuuming and dusting and snooping, learning nothing more of significance. I was making up a shopping list about fifteen minutes later when I heard her moan. I reached her bedroom door in seconds, waited in the doorway with both hands in sight, and said slowly and clearly, "My name is Joseph Templeton. Karen, I am a friend. You are all right now."

Her eyes were those of a small tormented animal.

Please don't try to get up. Your muscles won't work properly and you may hurt your self.

No answer.

Karen: are you hungry?

Your voice is ugly, she said, despairingly, and her own voice was hoarse.

She was clearly incapable of movement. I told her I would be right back and went to the kitchen. I made up a tray of clear strong broth, unbuttered toast, tea with too much sugar, and Saltine crackers. She was staring at the ceiling when I got back. I put the tray down. I told her and made a backrest of pillows.

I want a drink.

After you eat," I said agreeably.

Who're you?

Mother Templeton, Est.

The soup, maybe. Not the toast. She got about half of it down, accepted some tea. I didn't want to overfill her. My drink.

Sure thing. I took the tray back to the kitchen. Finished my shopping list, put away the last of the dishes, and put a frozen steak into the oven for my lunch. When I got back she was fast asleep.

Emaciation was near total, except for breasts and bloated belly she was all bone

and taut skin. Her pulse was steady. At her best she would not have been very attractive by conventional standards. Possible. Too much waist, not enough neck, upper legs a bit too thick for the rest of her. It's hard to evaluate a starved and unconscious face, but her jaw was a bit too square, her nose a little hooked, her blue eyes just the least little bit too far apart. Anwarred, the face might have been beautiful—any set of features can support beauty—but even a superb makeup job could not have made her pretty. There was an old bruise on her chin. Her hair was sandy blond, long and thin, it had died in snarls that would take an hour to comb out. Her breasts were magnificent, and that saddened me. In the world a woman whose breasts are her best feature is in for a rough time.

I was putting together a picture of a life that would have depressed anyone with the sensitivity of a rhino. Back when I had first seen her, when her features were alive, she had looked serene. Or had that been a trick of the juice? Impossible to say now.

But damn it all to hell. I could find nothing to really explain the socket in her skull. You can heal worse life stories in any bar on any street corner. I was prepared to match her scar for scar myself. Wireheads are usually addictive personalities who decide at last to skip the small shit. There were no traces on her anywhere, no visible damage, no sign that she used any of the coke she sold. Her work history, pitiful and fragmented as it was, was too steady for any kind of serious habit. She had undeniably been hitting the sauce hard lately, but only lately. Tobacco seemed to be her only serious addiction.

That left the hypothesis of bastard lover. I worried all that for a while to see if I could make it fit. Assume a really creatively sadistic son of a bitch had gutted her like a trout for the pure fun of it. You can't do that to someone as a visitor or even a guest; you have to live with them. So he did a world-class job of crippling a lady who by her history is a tough little cookie, and when he had broken her, he vanished. Leaving not even so much as empty space in drawers, closets, or medicine chest. Unlikely. So perhaps after he was gone she scrubbed all traces of him out of the apartment—and then discovered that there is only one really good way to scrub memories. No, I couldn't picture such a sloppy housekeeper being so efficient.

Then I thought of my earlier feeling that the bedroom might have been tossed by a pro, and my blood turned to ice water. 131

pose she wasn't a sloppy housekeeper? The jolly assistant returns unexpectedly for one last nibble. And finds her in the living room, just as I did. And leaves her there.

After five minutes, though I believed that didn't parse either. Thus, this luxury co-op did inexplicably lack security cameras in the halls—but for that very reason its rich tenants would be sure to take notice of comings and goings. If he had lived here for any time at all, his spear was too diffuse to erase—so he would not have tried. He sides a monster of that unique and rare kind thrives on the corruption of innocence. Karen was simply not foolish enough.

At that point I went to the bathroom and that settled it. When I lifted the seat to urinate, I found written on the underside with felt-tip pen: "It's so nice to have a man around the house!" The handwriting was hers. She had lived alone.

I was relieved, because I hadn't relished thinking about my hypothetical monster or the necessity of tracking and killing him. But I was misled as hell again.

I wanted to understand.

For something to do, I took my steak and a mug of coffee to the study and heated up her terminal. I tried all the typical access codes: her birthdate and her name in numbers and such, but none of them would unlock it. Then on a hunch I tried the date of her parents' death, and that did it. I ordered the groceries she needed, instructed the lobby door to accept delivery and tried everything I could think of to get a diary or a journal out of the damned thing, without success. So I punched up the public library and asked the catalog for *Barnum's* on wheheading. It referred me to barnward, automobile of I skipped over the history from discovery by Olds and others in 1966 to emergence as a social problem in the late 80s when supery got simple declined the offered diagrams, grapes, and technical specs, finally found a brief section on motivations.

There was indeed one type of typical user I had overlooked. The terminally ill.

Could that really be it? At her age? I went to the bathroom and checked the prescriptions. Nothing for heavy pain, nothing indicating anything more serious than allergies. Back before telephones had cameras I might have conned something out of her personal physician, but it would have been a chancy thing even then. There was no way to test the hypothesis.

It was possible, even plausible—but it just wasn't likely enough to satisfy the thing

inside me that demanded an explanation. I dared a game of four-wall squash and made sure the computer would let me win. I was almost enjoying myself when she screamed.

It wasn't much of a scream; her throat was shot. But it leached me at once. I saw the problem as I closed the door. The topical anesthetic had worn off the large, bedsores on her back and buttocks, and the pain had waked her. Now that I thought about it, it should have happened earlier, that spray was only supposed to be good for a few hours. I decided that her pleasure-pain system was weakened by overload.

The sores were bad, she would have soars. I resprayed them, and her moans stopped nearly at once. I could devise no means of securing her on her belly that would not be nightmare-inducing, and decided it was unnecessary. I thought she was out again and started to leave. Her voice, muffled by pillows, stopped me in my tracks.

"I don't know you. Maybe you're not even real. I can tell you."

"Save your energy, Karen. You—"
"Shut up. You wanted the karma, and now you got it."
I shut up.

Her voice was flat, dead. "All my friends were dating at twelve. He made me wait until fourteen. Said I couldn't be trusted. Tommy came to take me to the dance, and he gave Tommy a hard time. I was so embarrassed. The dance was nice for a couple of hours. Then Tommy started chasing after Jo Tompkins. He just left me and went off with her. I went in the ladies' room and cried for a long time. A couple of girls got the story out of me, and one of them had a bottle of vodka in her purse. I never drank before. When I started leaning upkins in the parking lot, one of the girls got afraid of Tommy. She gave him shit and made him take me home. I don't remember it. I found out later."

Her throat gave out and I got water. She accepted it without meeting my eyes, turned her face away and continued.

Tommy got me in the door somehow. I was out cold by then. He must have been too scared to try and get me upstairs. He left me on the couch and my underpants on the rug and went home. The next thing I knew I was on the floor and my face hurt. He was standing over me. Whole, he said. I got up and tried to explain and he hit me a couple of times. I ran for the door, but he hit me hard in the back. I went into the stairs and

banged my head real hard.

Feeling began to come into her voice for the first time. The feeling was fear. I dared not move.

"When I woke up, it was day. Mama must have bandaged my head and put me to bed. My head hurt a lot. When I came out of the bathroom, I heard him call me. He and Mama were in bed. He started in on me. He wouldn't let me talk, and kept getting madder and madder. Finally I hollered back at him. He got up off the bed and started hitting me again. My robe came off. He kept hitting me in the belly and his, and his fists were like hammers. But, he kept saying, 'Where I thought he was going to kill me, so I grabbed one arm and bit. He roared like a dragon and threw me across the room. Onto the bed. Mama jumped up. Then he pulled down his underpants and it was big and purple. I screamed and screamed and tore at his back and Mama just stood there. Her eyes were big and round, just like in cartoons. I screamed and screamed and—"

She broke off short and her shoulders knotted. When she continued her voice was stone dead again. I woke up in my own bed again. I took a real long shower and went downstairs. Mama was making pancakes. I sat down and she gave me one and I ate it, and then I threw it up right there on the table and ran out the door. She never said a word, never called me back. After school that day I found a Sanctuary and started the divorce proceedings. I never saw either of them again. I never told this to anybody before.

The pause was so long I thought she had fallen asleep. Since that time I've tried it with men and women and boys and girls, in the dark and in the desert sun, with people I cared for and people I didn't give a damn about, and I have never understood the pleasure in it. The best it's ever been for me is not uncomfortable. God, how I've wondered, how I know. She was starting to drift. Only thing my whole life turned out better in cracked up to be. She snorted sleepily. Even alone.

I sat there for a long time without moving. My legs trembled when I got up, and my hands trembled while I made supper.

That was the last time she was lucid for nearly forty-eight hours. I fed her with successively stronger soups every time she woke up, and once I got some tea-soggy toast into her. Sometimes she called me by others' names, and sometimes she didn't

know I was there, and everything she said was disjointed. I listened to her tapes watched some of her video, charged some books and games to her computer. I took a lot of her aspirin. And drank surprisingly little of her booze.

It was a time of frustration for me. I still couldn't make it all fit together, still could not quite understand. There was a large piece missing. The animal who snored and raised her head planted the charge of course, and I perceived that it was big enough to blow her apart. But why had it taken eight years to go off? His death four years ago had not triggered it, what had? I could not leave until I knew. I did not know why not. I prowled her apartment like a caged bear.

Midway through the second day her plumbing started working again. I had to change the sheets. The next morning a noise woke me and I found her on the bathroom floor on her knees in a pool of urine. I got her clean and back to bed, and just as I thought she was going to drift off again she started yelling at me. "Lousy son of a bitch, it could have been over! I'll never have the guts again now! How could you do that to your bastard? It was so nice!" She turned violently away from me and curled up. I had to make a hard choice then and I gambled on what I knew of loneliness and sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair as gently and impersonally as I knew how. It was a good guess. She began to cry in great racking heaves first, then the steady wail of lost heartbreak. I had been praying for this and did not begrudge the strength it cost her.

She cried for so long that every muscle in my body ached from sitting still by the time she fell off the edge into sleep. She never felt me get up, stiff and clumsy as I was. There was something different about her sleeping face now. It was not slack but relaxed. I limped out in the closest thing to peace I had felt since I arrived, and as I was passing the living room on the way to the liquor, I heard the phone.

Silently I looked over the caller. The picture was undercontrasted and snowy. It was a pay phone. He looked like an immi grant construction worker, massive and florid and reckless almost brash. And at the moment, under great stress. He was crushing a hat in his hands.

Sharon, don't hang up," he was saying. "I gotta find out what this is all about."

Nothing could have made me hang up.

Sharon? Sharon. I know you're there. Terry says you ain't there, she says she

called you every day for a week and banged on your door a few times. But I know you're there, now anyway. I walked past your place an hour ago and I seen your bathroom light go on and off. Sharon, will you please tell me what the hell is going on? Are you listening to me? I know you're listening to me. Look, you gotta understand, I thought it was all set, see? I mean I thought it was set. Arranged. I put it to Terry, cause she's my regular, and she says not me, lower, but I know a gal, Look, was she lying to me or what? She told me for another bill you play them kind of games.

Regular two-hundred-dollar bank deposits plus a cardboard box full of scales, vials, bags, and milk powder makes her a coke dealer, right. Travis McGee? Don't be misled by the fact that the box was shoved in a corner, sealed with tape, and covered with dust. After all, the only other illicit profession that pays regular sums at regular intervals is hooker, and two hundred dollars is too much for square-jawed, hook-nosed, wide-eyed little Karen, breasts or no breasts.

For a garden-variety hooker.

"Dammit, she told me she called you and set it up, she gave me your apartment number. He shook his head violently. "I can't make sense of this. Dammit, she couldn't be lying to me. It don't figure. You let me in, didn't I even turn the camera on first, it was all arranged. Then you screamed and and I dove like we arranged, and I thought you was maybe overdone, it a bit, but Terry said you was a terrific address. I was real careful not to really hurt you. I know I was. Then I put on my pants and I'm putting the envelope on the dresser and you bust that cheer on me and come at me with that knife and I hadda bust you one. It just don't make no sense, will you goddammit say something to me? I'm twisted up inside going on two weeks now. I can't even eat."

I went to shut off the phone, and my hand was shaking so bad I missed, spinning the volume knob to minimum. Sharon you gotta believe me, he hollered from far far away. "I'm into rape fantasy. I'm not into tape! And then I had found the right switch and he was gone."

I got up very slowly and toddled off to the liquor cabinet, and I stood in front of it taking pulls from different bottles at random until I could no longer see his face, his earnest, baffled, half-ashamed face hanging before me.

Because his hair was thin sandy blond and his jaw was a bit too square, and his nose was a trifle hooked, and his blue eyes

were just the least little bit too far apart. They say everyone has a double somewhere. And fate is such a wily little mother-fucker, ain't he?

I don't remember how I got to bed. I woke later that night with the feeling that I would have to bang my head on the floor a couple of times to get my heart started again. I was on my makeshift doas of pillows and blankets beside her bed, and when I finally poked my eyes open she was sitting up in bed, staring at me. She had fixed her hair somehow, and her nails were trimmed. We looked at each other for a long moment. Her color was returning somewhat, and the edge was off her bones.

What did Jo Ann say when you told her?

I said nothing.

Come on, Jo Ann is got the only other key to this place, and she wouldn't give it to you if you weren't a friend. So what did she say?

I got painfully up, out of the tangle and walked to the window. A phallic church steeple rose above the low-sills, a couple of blocks away.

God is an iron, I said. Did you know that?

I turned to look at her, and she was staring. She laughed experimentally, stopped when I failed to join in. And I'm a pair of pants with a hole scorched through the ass?

If a person who indulges in gluttony is a glutton, and a person who commits a felony is a felon, then God is an iron. Or else he's the dumbest designer that ever lived.

Of a thousand possible snap reactions she picked the most flattering, and hence most enticing. She kept silent, kept looking at me and thought about what I had said. At last she said, I agree. What particular design looked did you have in mind?

"The one that nearly left you dead in a pile of your own shit," I said harshly. Everybody talks about the new menace, wreathing fifth most common cause of death in only a decade. Wireheading is not new—if it's just a technical refinement.

I don't follow.

Are you familiar with the old cliché "Everything I like in the world is either illegal, immoral, or fattening?"

Sure.

Didn't that ever strike you as damned odd? What's the most rationally useless and physiologically dangerous food substance in the world? Sugar. And it seems to be beyond the power of the human nervous

system to resist it. They put it in virtually all the processed food there is, which is a need to all the food there is, because nobody can resist it. And so we poison ourselves and whipsaw our dispositions and rot our teeth on it that odd? There is a primitive programming in our skulls that rewards us, literally overwhelmingly, every time we do something damned silly. Like smoke a poison, or eat or drink or snort or shoot a poison. Or overeat good foods. Or engage in complicated sexual behavior without procreative intent, which if it were not for the pleasure would be pointless and insane. And which, when pursued for the pleasure alone, quickly becomes pointless and insane any way. A suicidal brain-reward system is built into us.

But the reward system is for survival. So how the hell did our get wired up so that survival-threatening behavior gets rewarded best of all? Even the pro-survival pleasure stimuli are wired so that a dangerous overload produces the maximum pleasure. On a purely biological level, Man is programmed to strive hugely for more than he needs, more than he can probably use.

The error doesn't show up as glaringly in other animals. Even surrounded by plenty a stupid animal has to work hard simply to meet his needs. But add intelligence and everything goes to hell. Man is capable of outgrowing any ecological niche you put him in—he survives at all because he is the animal that moves. Given half a chance, he kills himself of surplus.

My knees were trembling so badly I had to sit down. I felt feverish and somehow larger than myself, and I knew I was taking much too fast. She had nothing whatever to say with voice face or body.

Given Man's gregarious nature, I went on fingering my aching nose. It's obvious that kindness is more pro-survival than cruelty. But which feels better? Which provides more pleasure? Feel any hundred people at random and you'll find at least twenty or thirty who know all there is to know about psychological torture and psychic castration—and maybe too that know how to give a terrific back rub. That business of your father leaving all his money to the Church and leaving you a hundred dollars, the going rate—that was insanity. I can't imagine a way to make you feel as good as that made you feel rotten. That's why sadism and masochism are the last refuge of the idiot, the most enduring of the perversions, their pri-macy.

Maybe the Puntans were right, she

said. "Maybe pleasure is the root of all evil. But God's life is bleak without it."

One of my most precious possessions I read is a button that my friend Slinky John used to hand-part and sell below cost. He was the only practicing anarchist I ever met. The button reads: "Go downwind, go!" A lemming surely feels intense pleasure as he gallops to the sea. His self-destruction is programmed by nature, a part of the very same life force that resulted on being conceived and born in the first place. If it feels good, do it. I laughed, and she finished.

So it seems to me that God is either an idiot or a colossal jackass. I don't quite know whether to be admiring or contemptuous.

All at once I was out of doors, and out of strength. I yanked my gaze away from hers and stared at my knees for a long time. I felt vaguely ashamed, as befitts one who has thrown a tantrum in a sickroom.

After a time she said, "You talk good on your foot."

I kept looking at my knees. "I was an economics teacher for a year once."

"Will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

What was the pleasure in putting me back together again?

I jumped.

Look at me. There. I've got a half-ass idea of what shape I was in when you met me, and I can guess what it's been like since. I don't know if I'd have done as much for Jo Ann, and she's my best friend. You don't look like a guy whose favorite kind is sick home, and you sure as hell don't look like you're so rich you got time on your hands. So what's been your pleasure? These last few days?

"Trying to understand," I snapped. I'm nosy.

And do you understand?

"Yeah. I put it together."

So you'll be going now?

Not yet. I said automatically. "You're not—"

And caught myself.

That's something else besides pleasure," she said. "Another system of reward, only I don't think it has much to do with the one I got wired up to my scalp here. Not brain-reward. Call it mind-reward. Call it joy—the thing like pleasure that you feel when you've done a good thing or pressed up a real tempting chance to do a bad thing. Or when the unfolding of the universe just seems especially apt. It's nowhere near as fleshy and intense as pleasure can be. Believe me. But it's got something going for it."

Something that can make you do without pleasure or even accept a lot of pain to get it.

"That thing you're talking about, that's there, that's true. What's missing us up is the animal nervous system and instincts we inherited. But you said yourself, Man is the animal that outgrows and moves. Ever since the first brain grew a mind we've been trying to outgrow our instincts, grow new ones. By Jesus, we will yet. Evolution works pretty slow is all. Couple of hundred million years to develop a thinking ape, and you want a smart one in a lousy few hundred thou? That lemming drive is there—but there's another kind of drive, another kind of force, that's working against it. Or else there wouldn't still be any people and there wouldn't be the words to have this conversation and—"

She looked down at herself. And I would be here to say them.

"That was just random chance. She snorted. What on?"

"Well, that's fine," I shouted. "That's fine. Since the world is saved and you've got it under control, I'll just be going along."

I've got a lot of voice when I yell. She ignored it utterly, continued speaking as if nothing had happened. "Now I can say that I have sampled the spectrum of the pleasure system at both ends—none and all there is—and I think the rest of my life I will dedicate myself to the middle of the road and see how that works out. Starting with the very weak tea and toast I'm going to ask you to bring me in another ten minutes or so. But as for this other stuff, this joy thing, that I would like to begin exploring, in as much intensity as possible. I don't really know a goddamn thing about it, but I understand it has something to do with sharing and caring, and what did you say your name was?"

"I do mean I matter!" I yelled.

"All right. What can I do for you?"

Nothing!

"What did you come here for?"

I was angry enough to be honest. To burgle your fucking apartment!

Her eyes opened wide, and then she slumped back against the pillows and laughed until the tears came, and I tried and could not help myself and laughed too, and we shared laughter for a long time as long as we had shared her tears the night before.

And then straight-faced she said, "You'll have to wait a week or two, you're gonna need help with those stereo speakers. Better on the road."

PICTORIAL
NUMBER THREE



PETE
TURNER
PHOTOGRAPHER



PLAINS OF FOREVER

A futuristic trip through the lens of a master photographer

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

Pete Turner's studio is a great white cube with polished wood floors. It is an appropriate place for the highly sophisticated advertising photography for which Turner is famous. Tall and thin, wearing denim and boots, Turner manipulates images on a white screen. "There are a lot of possible places to begin, but I chose Stonehenge. It's a symbol of man pulling himself out of neolithic unconsciousness, building something never before imagined. And the road is my symbol for the human journey. Roads go on forever, and this is just a road, moving straight out to infinity." I notice the shapes to the right of the road, out of scale, ominous. What are they? "Something concrete, but unknowable. They are the mystery—the reason we keep on traveling down the road."





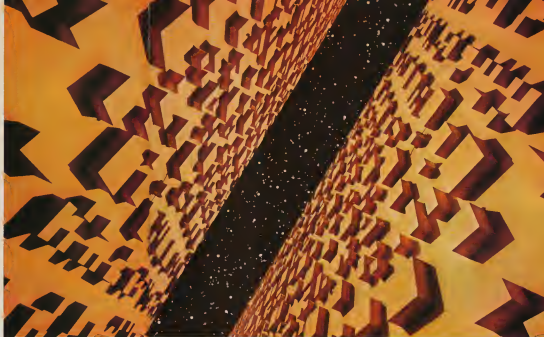
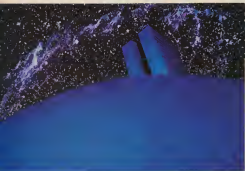
The bubble is what's called a minimum structure, stabilized by pressure. I injected a very spiky object inside it. And I used a very intense light source. It's almost coherent light. I put the two objects together and ask myself whether it's too complex. There are unlimited options in this. It becomes an alien vision—a sort of magic.



Turner is not at ease with words. He is suspicious of them, a maker of images rather than a teller of tales. He shapes his thoughts with long thin fingers, trying to make them palatable, hoping they will fit the wordless matters he has photographed. "And here we have light, transparency, the bubble of consciousness. Transparent bubbles with coherent light at the core—that's us. We see simultaneously the light source and the thing it illuminates. Our lives are spent seeing what there is to be seen by our own light. And what we see, no other species on Earth has ever seen before." Any sentient creature can see the sky, but only man, only a Turner, can see the window in the sky and pass through it, even though it isn't there, to the beyond that lies within us. Turner nods. "That's it. We see through ourselves into the universe."



"You've got to switch thinking. It's important to be able to play with these things. This city is really Brasília. It's been reduced and the windows have been removed so they don't read as lights. The only lights are in the sky. The image has been manipulated. That side of the building is the museum. It's been flipped over to create this incredible perspective."



The images symbolize states of mind as well as future activities. Here is the present, and here is what it leads to. It's something the ancient world never knew: geometric sterility, the possibility of a world entirely divorced from nature. It scares me, the way these walls rise up toward the stars, and there's nothing inside them or outside them. The image is even more frightening, because it has no indication of scale. But if man were there, he would be an insect, an insignificant ink spot marking the mindless regularity of those perfect walls. "Yes, and this is the final city, perched upon the barren earth, its sloped buildings naked to the stars. And there's the final graveyard, where the only monuments to our long history are cones and spheres, signifying nothing."

•These aliens are real, but undefinable. I think they are what we are going to become. •

Turner is an optimist. His images are cautionary rather than predictive. When you work with these forms, you have to feel what they mean rather than tell it literally. Here is an ultimate landscape, crystalline in its purity. What about those shapes above the plain: those entities coming through the foreground? It is the aliens, of course. They're ambiguous—visually definite, verbally indefinable. And they're more than just aliens. I think they're also us in our next stage of development. I think we can escape from the trap we're building for ourselves: escape from our fatal geometricity. I think we transform ourselves. Into what? Turner doesn't know, since the caterpillar can't imagine the butterfly it will become. The process of transformation can only be hinted at.

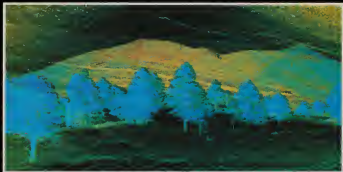


"I called it Moon's Moon. I wanted to symbolize what would happen toward the end—nothing apocalyptic, just old age, turning older, the moon's end, decaying." Arthur C. Clarke once wrote that for every human who has walked the face of the earth, there is a star in the universe. The old transforms into the new. It is the end, but also the beginning.



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